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HUBERT FREETH'S PROSPERITY.

VOL. I.

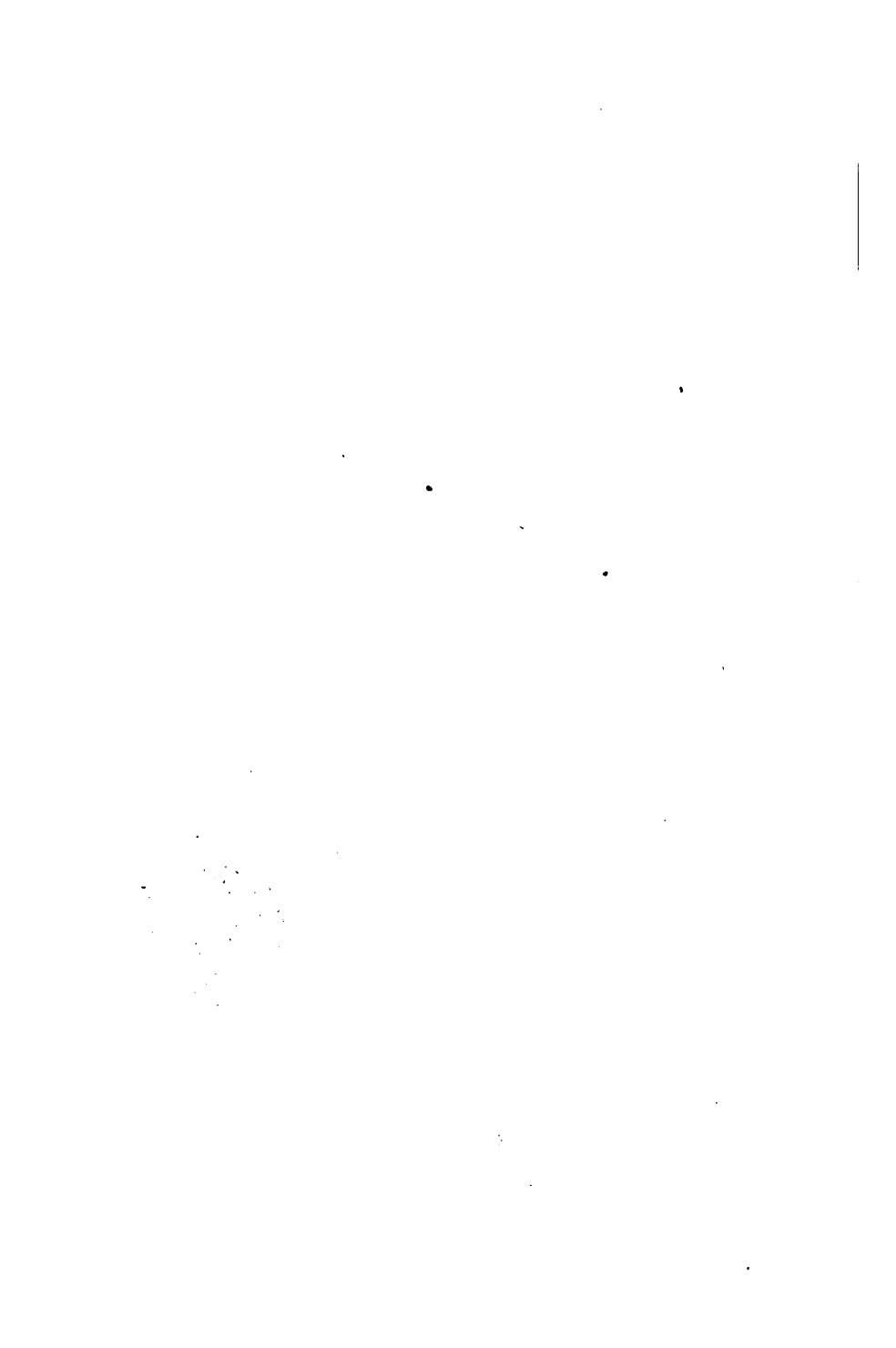
HUBERT FREETH'S PROSPERITY.

VOL. I.





SHERS,
ET.



HUBERT FREETH'S PROSPERITY.

BY

MRS. NEWTON CROSLAND,

AUTHOR OF

"MRS. BLAKE," "THE DIAMOND WEDDING,"

&c. &c.

Commend me to home joy—the family board
Altar and hearth! These with a brisk career
A source of honest profit and good fame,
Just so much work as keeps the brain from rust,
Just so much play as lets the heart expand,
Honouring God and serving man—I say
These are reality, and all else—fluff,
Nutsell, and naught.

ROBERT BROWNING.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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TO ONE

WHOSE WIDE SYMPATHIES THE WORLD'S "PROSPERITY"

HAS FAILED TO NARROW,

THE LADY GEORGINA MILNER,

THIS BOOK IS INSCRIBED,

WITH THE TRUEST RESPECT AND REGARD,

BY

HER LADYSHIP'S OBLIGED AND DEVOTED SERVANT,

THE AUTHOR.

HUBERT FREETH'S PROSPERITY.

VOL. I.

• HUBERT FREETH'S PROSPERITY.

CHAPTER I.

HOW HE BROKE THE GOOD NEWS.

You and your home were once my world—they still
Are yours ; but outside there has grown to me
Another world of business and of care.
I do not love my inner world the less
Because for its dear sake I toil without.

WADE ROBINSON.

THE cosy little parlour in which Hubert Freeth and his wife were sitting would, I think, have been rich in suggestions to a painter of *genre* pictures. The season was early Winter, and the weather clear and frosty, so the fire burned brightly, as if in cheery challenge to the keen, dry air, and looked the more radiant be-

cause its darting tongues of flame were reflected in a highly-polished stove. Indeed, everything in the room bore the sheen of brightness and neatness, and testified to the careful supervision of a good housewife.

Curtains of dark red cotton damask were drawn before the closed window-shutters; on one side of the fire a large leathern chair, showing on its elbows the signs of long service, permitted its occupant, the master of the house, to read his newspaper in an easy, half-reclining attitude, while, at the opposite corner of the table, with her open work-box at her side, sat Mrs. Freeth, diligently employed.

A page of copied music was slanted up to dry; a boy's slate and school-books were left upon the sideboard; and some children's toys, belonging to little folks, now fast asleep, seemed just the accessories which relieved an absolute prim orderliness that might otherwise have been a shade too rigid. Yet the gas-burner—one only of two or three being alight—shed its beams upon something still more infantile than toys and school-books, namely, a bassinet, placed upon two chairs in a snug corner of the room,

the six months' old darling which it contained looking like a rosebud, partly from baby Lucy's own natural hue of health, partly from the shadow of the pink and white drapery which ornamented her little cot.

At intervals all was so still that the ticking of a clock on the mantelpiece seemed musically beating the measure of the passing time; though every now and then the wife, between the clicks of her scissors, babbled of household matters, or the husband, beginning with a "Listen, Bessie," read aloud a paragraph from the *Times*, simplifying afterward politics and city news for his wife's edification.

Politics and city news were always important subjects to Hubert Freeth, but to-night they were of absorbing interest, and so linked themselves with the thoughts which were paramount in his mind, that he found them, by many degrees, the easiest newspaper intelligence to discuss. And yet he was not reading with his usual rapid assimilation and sharp attention. Many and many a paragraph on general topics which he perused left only a vague impression on his mind; and his wife was wholly uncon-

scious how often his gaze turned sideways from the crackling paper to fall on herself.

As yet, undistorted by hoops of steel, the outline of her pretty little figure was worth remarking; and once or twice, when she stood up, the more easily to achieve the cutting out of baby's scarlet cloak, the lines of her grey merino dress showed gracefully as she moved. She had a profile that would have been nearly Grecian had the lips been set to that type; but though her mouth was small, its curve was expressive of gentleness, and, though mobile, it never took the scornful shapeliness of the Cupid's bow. Her blue eyes were what is understood by dove-like, and light but bright and silky hair, was braided about a small but well-shaped head.

Hubert Freeth was a good-looking man of the type which generally leads captive gentle, timid women; or, stay, is it not that men of strong wills and great practical abilities—qualities which write their hieroglyphics on the countenance—are commonly, and especially in their youth, themselves first and forcibly attracted by those soft feminine natures which

seem, like wax, to mould, and, by love's teaching, "marble to retain?" Nearly six feet high, he was portly in proportion, and, though only about forty, it was a mass of iron-grey hair which shadowed his broad, full brow. Fine, dark eyes, that could, on rare occasions, soften and glow in loving tenderness, shone beneath well-marked eyebrows, and gave to the face an expression of keen intelligence.

To those eyes were allied a rather aquiline nose and a firmly-rounded chin; but the softening feature of the face was the mouth, which, though well-closed in repose, could curve easily into smiles, and reveal in hearty laughter a set of white and even teeth. But for all the capability of mirth or tenderness, Hubert Freeth was a man not only of strong will, but of indomitable self-reliance, and not precisely what even a panegyrist would call a safe-tempered individual. It may be admitted that he had had much in his life to try his temper, and it had chafed under circumstances of tedious subordination, or rather that semi-subordination in which great responsibilities are accepted without a commensurate free-will and authority.

To his meek little wife, however, who never thwarted him, and who was always ready to receive his will for law, he was habitually gentle, and, moreover, always ready to uphold her authority among the children, and be the support her more yielding nature required.

Behold, then, the pen-and-ink portraits of this wedded pair, after twenty years of married life! They had been what the worldly-wise call a rash young couple, who had rushed into matrimony at twenty and eighteen years old respectively, upon an income of a hundred and fifty pounds a year; mating as the birds do in the sweet Spring season, and without much thought of the far-off Autumn days. Their case had confounded the theories of the worldly-wise. It is true the howl of the wolf had been heard very near their door, but then it was in the days when love was engaged in leading a choral concert of youth's bright hopes and expectations; so the howl was partially drowned, and busy love stayed where he was, instead of flying out of the window. Little mouths came one after another, and gaped in the nest much as little birds gape for sustenance, and the parents had managed to

satisfy them ; and by-and-by the wolf was somehow appeased, and its howl grew fainter, and finally died away altogether.

And on that Winter evening of which I am telling, Hubert Freeth leaned back in his easy-chair, and often, when he seemed to be reading, he was looking over his newspaper with tender regard at his wife, and recalling successive scenes of their married life. After the first few years of hardship and struggle, every year had been one of steady advance ; steady, but yet slow, for Hubert Freeth's position had been peculiar, and while in some respects what many people called fortunate, had yet very probably retarded the free development of his character and the full expansion of his powers.

The only nephew of a rich bachelor, he had been taken into his uncle's employment at an early age. Hubert had proved himself clever from the first, and he was indeed endowed with just that rare combination of faculties which is necessary to the civil engineer, in these days when his profession constitutes a mighty instrument of material power and progress. Nevertheless, old Thomas Freeth, while profiting to

the full by his nephew's talents and industry, had dealt with him parsimoniously, paying him for his labour at the mere market price of a far inferior assistant's salary or commission. It is true that from time to time this payment had been raised, by the evidently increased value of his nephew's services, but the old man did not disdain to take advantage of the subtle invisible ties which bound Hubert, and hindered him from seeking other fields for his labours.

Thomas Freeth was a rich old man, with a name and a fame in the world; rich was he, and somewhat of a miser, yet capable of eccentric acts of generosity. But on these no one could safely calculate, for he was afflicted with a fitful and yet sullen temper, for which no exorcist had ever been found. Well was it understood by all his dependents that to offend him once was to offend him for ever; and though perhaps he was little loved, there were a good many people from whom his apparently rigid truthfulness of character, his great business abilities and influential position, extorted a degree of respect.

From year to year the old man, with the reins

of power thus firmly grasped in his hand, had led Hubert to believe that at some due season he should be admitted his partner, and proclaimed his heir. Meanwhile there had been a difficult path for the aspirant to tread through some of the brightest years of eager manhood. Often, indeed, when chafing at the smallness of his means, had he regretted and repented that he had not years before broken loose from his fetters, and flung himself upon his own resources; resources which he felt within himself were sufficient to deserve a brimming measure of worldly success. But then a little voice had whispered of kindness in his boyhood, and of the blackness of ingratitude; and doubtless there had also arisen before his mental eye an *ignis fatuus*-like vision, cheating him to believe that the fruition of his hopes, from time to time, was near.

But to-night—at last—he had the sudden fact, the wondrous news, of day-dreams realized to communicate, and as yet he had not spoken to his Bessie of the event of which his mind was so full. Quite well he knew that no one on earth loved him as did that faithful wife; and

yet, made fearful by many cares, she had ever been slow to realize his successes, and trust in his expectations of prosperity. Nay, there seemed some spring in her nature which always rose the most supportingly under trial and difficulty, but trembled and quailed at the prospect of new and wide responsibilities.

At first he had waited till the younger children were out of the room; but though the news he had to tell was of a sort that no man ever yet considered evil, he seemed to halt in his purpose, as if dreading to ruffle his Bessie's present calm content. Besides, she was a sensitive woman, by no means in rude health, and he wished to spare her the start of surprise.

As he watched her "cutting and contriving," with a pleased smile rippling over her face whenever she found her pattern accommodate itself to a corner, so that her baby's scarlet cloak could be shaped without waste of material, he thought what a paragon wife and mother she had been, and conjured up a thousand scenes exemplifying her patience, her diligence, her devotion. Ah, how they should all be recompensed when he had made her understand—as

understand of course she would—that there was no longer need for personal toil or small economies ; for petty, anxious calculations and trivial painstaking !

“There !” she exclaimed, when the pieces of the little garment were duly shaped and prepared for joining together ; “there, I must put baby’s cloak away till the morning, and get out some white work. I declare my eyes quite ache from looking at the bright red by gas-light.”

“Then, my love,” replied her husband, “I must beg you to-morrow to buy baby a pretty cloak, ready made, and not put a stitch into anything which hurts your eyes.”

“Hubert, what are you talking about ?” and Mrs. Freeth looked up, as she spoke, with evident surprise.

“My dear Bessie, I mean exactly what I say ;” and feeling aware that now the ice was broken, he added, “I am sure, if you never thread a needle again, you will still have done enough work already in your life for any two good mothers ; and, for the future, we will have the children nicely dressed without taxing your dear eyes.”

"But the expense, Hubert! Why, I thought you understood such things better than men generally do, and I never expected to hear you talk such nonsense."

"I think I am talking excellent sense," he said with a smile, "although it is suddenly suggested; for indeed I never heard you complain of your eyes aching before to-night."

"Oh, it is of no use complaining, but they do ache when I work for more than an hour or two."

"Then you see my law must be carried out. You shall have all the gold there is in my pocket, to buy baby's cloak;" and, as he spoke, he took from his pocket, in man's fashion, a handful of money, and picked out three sovereigns from among the shillings and sixpences. There, I don't want them, I am going to draw a lot of money to-morrow."

"A lot of money!" exclaimed the wife; "but tell me how much. If your uncle were going to double the last commission, we could not afford to go on in this way. Catherine comes home to-morrow, and I expect she will want a quantity of new things, she is so very careless with her

clothes, and so inclined to be extravagant."

"I am glad of it," said the husband, with the air of one who in a game of skill is advancing favourably.

"Glad! Why, she has tastes more fit for a duchess than for a poor man's daughter. My dear Bert, you are so odd to-night that you quite frighten me." And Mrs. Freeth took out her handkerchief to wipe the eyes which were moistened either from their "aching" or from irrepressible emotion.

And now Hubert Freeth rose from his chair, drew his wife towards him, and kissed her again and again with something better than loverlike tenderness and devotion.

"My darling," he exclaimed, "I wanted to tell you that competence, more than competence, is coming to us at last; and this is why I am glad that our blooming Kate has tastes which can help us properly to fulfil our new duties."

"What is it?—what are you to be?" asked the wife, in a husky voice, hiding her face on his shoulder.

"Ostensibly partner with my uncle;—but,

perhaps, in reality the true leader in his great undertakings. See, these government contracts alluded to in the city article of to-day, they are undertaken from my plans and my calculations; and it really would appear that my uncle has been seized at last by the spirit of generosity. He seems suddenly anxious that all the world should recognize my services, and that I should reap a harvest of many bygone undertakings. It is true that motives are generally mixed. At seventy years of age he may feel that he cannot carry out these great schemes without the acknowledged co-operation of all my powers,—and he would not have the world think him unjust at the end of his career. All this I wanted to tell you, my Bessie, without giving you a sudden start and surprise, for ever since you fainted away at a piece of good news, I have understood what a fragile little body it is.”

“Oh, that day I was ill and exhausted—you need not have feared for me to-night. Well, now,” she added, in a half-coaxing tone, “now that you will have so many people under you to do all the work at the office just as you order them, you will be able to come home early al-

ways, will you not?—and that will be so delightful.”

“Nay, my labours are not to be lightened. Very much the contrary, I assure you. And for this reason I shall want from the best wife in the world all the assistance possible, to make the small disturbing circumstances of life disturb me as little as possible. I know very well that for the next few weeks domestic matters cannot be much altered;—but as soon as we get into a suitable commodious dwelling, my Bessie shall have a banker’s account of her own, and I shall be able to afford the family such an income that I think she will never have anxieties about money matters again.”

“Must we leave this house?” asked the wife, with something very like a sigh.

“With an income likely to range between four and five thousand a year, we need not put up with inconveniences to which it has been a duty to submit with only about four hundred.

“Four or five thousand a year!” exclaimed Mrs. Freeth, and her cheek so paled that, for a moment, her husband feared a repetition of the fainting; “but surely,” she continued, “you do

not mean to spend such a sum—surely we ought to save quite half of such an income.”

“No, I think not; for my uncle assures me that I and my children are his principal legatees, and his large fortune will be amply sufficient to divide ultimately, even among seven.”

“But how can we spend such an income?”

“How? Why, do you see any difficulty? and with seven children! Was there ever such a woman in the world before!” and another kiss preceded the next words. “In the first place,” he continued, “Lionel can now have his will, and study for the bar in right earnest.”

“He will be delighted, of course; but still it seems hard,” she added, with a sigh, “it seems hard to sacrifice the money we scraped together for his articles with such difficulty only two years ago.”

“That does not signify at all. The boy has studied early and late, as we know he is doing at this moment, and has managed to cram a great deal of law into his head during the last two years; and it will not vanish under more favourable training. Indeed, when one considers that he has performed drudging duties

not usually demanded from an articled clerk for the sake of obtaining a small salary, it is wonderful what he has done, and I feel that we are justified in believing that his strong desire to study the law is an instinct it would be almost criminal to thwart. I shall write to Smith and Brown to cancel his articles to-morrow, and send him to one of the universities immediately. As for the younger children, they ought to cost me hundreds a year for a long time to come."

"Of course, dear Hubert, all these things must be as you think best."

"Yes, yes, but I want you, my love, to see the propriety, indeed the necessity, of carrying out these plans. My uncle has given me three thousand pounds to furnish a house, and set us forward."

"Oh, how good of him! I am sure I am very grateful for such prosperity, and I dare say you are quite right in your ideas. Only the whole thing is so sudden—my mind is quite bewildered with so many new projects."

"Is it sudden?" said her husband. "It does not seem so to me. Year after year I have been hoping for a larger income; and do you

not remember how often you have said that a little more money was all that was necessary to make us completely happy."

"Yes, another fifty pounds now and then, when it was such a hard matter to keep the bills under. But you know I have often said that I did not altogether envy rich people."

"Sour grapes, surely!" exclaimed Hubert Freeth, with some impatience in his tone.

"Don't be vexed with me, dear Berty," said Mrs. Freeth, meekly. "What I meant was that I did not envy rich people their great responsibilities, and the restless excitement of their manner of living. And now that we are going to have so much money, I am afraid we are laying down plans to do just like the rest of the world."

"But what is the use of money unless one spends it?"

"I should like it to have and to give, and to spend liberally too; but I have lived so quietly all my life that I am sure I should be shy and frightened among gay and extravagant people."

"Well, my dear, there will be plenty, I think, for you to have and to give, as well as to spend

liberally ; and as for your being shy and frightened in a different circle, the idea is absurd. You are pretty, and sensible, and well-bred, fit, in my opinion, to adorn any station. You will soon grow accustomed to many things which now seem strange ; surely you are too well disciplined to become selfish and enervated by luxury, and in a little time you will find your sphere of usefulness vastly extended. Money is a mighty power ; think of the difference it will make to our children ! Besides, merely spending money with judgment and liberality does a great deal of good—but I see I must instruct you a little in political and social economy, before you will rejoice at prosperity as I do.”

“I do rejoice,” said the wife, laying her hand affectionately on his arm, “and have my own little castle-building already, I assure you. Only I rejoice not without fear and trembling. And when you talk, Hubert, so warmly about money, I cannot forget that you have often said mind is a greater influence than money.”

“Well, in the sense of its remoter consequences, so it is. But when mind and money

are united, they make a nearly irresistible influence."

"An influence which needs wise direction," observed the lady.

"Yes, yes, of course. But what I want you to understand is that money, whether we earn or inherit it, still represents labour; that is, labour directed by mind—since no other is productive. Therefore, money has a right to the respect which is often only blindly paid to it, and I feel that we are justified in assuming some new dignity. Believe me it is so; and again and again, I say, let us both rejoice, and be grateful that prosperity has come at last!"

CHAPTER II.

ROUND THE TEA-TABLE.

Brilliant hopes, all woven in gorgeous tissues,
Flaunting gaily in the golden light.

LONGFELLOW.

WHEN Mrs. Freeth presided at the tea-table the following evening, she could hardly believe that only a single day had passed since the conversation already recorded. New interests, new duties, new expectations, had bridged over the hours, and so marked the life of to-day that the life of yesterday seemed to recede comparatively deep into the past. Even the aspect of the room was visibly changed. Instead of needlework, letters and writing materials were scattered about, and several parcels, newly arrived, spoke of recent purchases.

Some of the children were present, and evidently in high spirits. Phoebe, a pretty-looking girl of fifteen, aware of her prettiness, shook back her curls from time to time with a toss of the head that was habitual to her, but had never been quite so marked as to-night. Some people said Phoebe Freeth's affectation had been a good deal fostered by her godmother, a sentimental single lady, who lived in a world of unrealities, and did a vast deal of mischief with the best intentions in the world. But she was really attached to the girl, and generous to her, half dressing her by presents. Moreover, there was a nice little fortune in the three per cents., some portion of which certain sanguine members of the Freeth family thought would very likely be ultimately bestowed on the goddaughter and namesake; and all but the wisest of parents are apt to deal leniently with errors of judgment in such "fairy godmothers."

The next sister, Jane, a year younger, yet with a wider sweep of character already observable in her nature, sat more quietly and silently than her sister, but with pleasure beaming in

her eyes. Being healthy, growing girls, their appetites were not very liable to derangement, and yet I think their minds were so occupied with pleasant anticipations, that the bread and butter would have been a little spared that evening had not Gilbert, the next in age, and little Edward—generally called “Teddy”—been prepared to make up for all deficiencies.

Of course the great good news which had been communicated to the children was realized by them somewhat vaguely. But children mentally cultured, who have been brought up in a rigidly economical household, are apt to have exaggerated notions about the delights of wealth, and perhaps prematurely to possess a little stock of worldly wisdom. In fact, “genteel poverty” is not good for the manners or morals of anybody.

The two young girls had only dim ideas of the changes which were impending; but their expectations included fine new clothes and a considerable increase of pocket-money, dancing and music-lessons from accomplished masters, and the privilege of giving young parties, as well as sometimes going to them. For they

argued to themselves that mamma would never again extinguish hopes by repeating a phrase with which they were very familiar,—“My dears, we cannot afford such things.”

As for Gilbert, his father had already promised him a watch, a fact which he announced as “jolly,” and evidently looked on as the one good thing which was sufficient for to-day. Gilbert was a boy more given to doing than dreaming; he was calm-tempered and good-natured rather than impulsively generous, and had a mathematical head, which impelled him to try to find out the “why” of everything.

“Will papa be late to-night?” asked the boy, as he stretched out his hand for another slice of bread and butter.

“I cannot tell you,” replied Mrs. Freeth; “he said I was on no account to wait for him, his movements were so uncertain. But why do you want to know?”

“About my watch. Do you think he will bring it home to-day?”

“I should think not,” said the mother, with a smile. “I fancy papa has been a great deal too busy to-day to think about the watch.”

Gilbert looked a little crest-fallen; but perhaps he consoled himself by the large spoonful of marmalade which he was in the act of taking.

"Gilbert! Gilbert!" exclaimed his mother, "what are you doing? Marmalade or butter—I will not allow both."

"Oh! just for this once, mamma—pray do."

"It is such extravagance," pursued Mrs. Freeth; "think of poor children who often have not dry bread to eat."

"What is the use of thinking of them, if we cannot help them. I am sure if a hungry child were here, I would give it this very slice."

Nevertheless, Master Gilbert munched his bread and butter *and* marmalade with evident satisfaction, undisturbed by an exhortation that had no novelty to recommend it. Perhaps little Teddy looked wistfully at the jar of marmalade, but five-years-old had not the rebellious daring of twelve.

"Is Lionel going to meet Catherine at Paddington?" asked Phoebe.

"Yes; but the train is not due till past eight. However, he said he should not attempt to come home first."

"I envy Lionel," observed Jane, "having such delightful good news to tell Catherine."

"Of course he will tell her," replied Mrs. Freeth.

"Oh! yes, in his off-hand way. I can just fancy him," said Phoebe, with a toss of her curls.

"I like Lionel's way," exclaimed Gilbert, who had a great admiration for his grown-up brother; "he can talk by the hour; but for all that he is the best fellow in the world for making one understand a thing. Mamma, what did Lionel's watch cost?—do you know?"

"I don't know. It was a present from Uncle Thomas, you remember."

Evidently the one idea was still paramount; though the boy was comforting himself very satisfactorily under the expectation of *not* having his watch to-night. "Papa never broke a promise," he said to himself, so it would be sure to be brought home some day soon.

Hubert Freeth was not in the habit of dining at home except on Sundays, and it was no unusual thing for his wife to be told not to wait

tea. This evening, however, he reached his suburban home while his family were still at the table; but his greeting, though gay and affectionate, was hurried, and his manner absent; and after extricating the newspaper from his pocket, he said to his wife, "There, Bessie, you will see what is said of our scheme; but I have not time to read it to you. I must have a fire lighted in the drawing-room. I have letters to write, and plans to consider, and you must keep the house-quiet, for I shall be busy all the evening. Tea? No, that looks too poor. Cannot I have a cup of strong coffee brought to me in the next room?"

And the fire was speedily lighted, though the room, disused since Sunday—and this was Thursday—took a long time in growing warm; and the anxious wife made the bright, strong coffee herself, and carried it to her husband with her own hands. She was a little vexed that he had to shut himself up away from her for hours, but she understood that of course he must have a great deal to do; and he spoke to her so lovingly, and looked himself so happy, that she was reconciled even to the disar-

rangement of her pretty little drawing-room, and to its bright stove being dimmed.

Hardly had she returned to the warm parlour, when the garden gate creaked, and the next minute there was a knock at the door.

"Who can it be at this hour?" exclaimed Mrs. Freeth—"it is too early for Catherine to arrive."

"It is like Mrs. Brindley's knock," said Jane, who was rather a shrewd observer of peculiarities.

Almost as she spoke there was heard the clear treble tone of their neighbour's voice, inquiring if Mrs. Freeth was at home, and would admit her this evening.

"Oh, pray walk in, we are quite alone," said Mrs. Freeth, herself opening the parlour door, and greeting her acquaintance with much cordiality.

"Thank you—thank you," returned Mrs. Brindley, removing a thick veil and calash which she had put on over a becoming head-dress, and revealing the face of a handsome woman in her prime. "I thought you would excuse an evening visit," she continued, "and I

knew this was the most likely time to see Mr. Lionel, whose advice I want on a little business."

"Lionel is gone to meet his sister, and will not be home for an hour or two; but pray," said Mrs. Freeth—"pray spend the evening with me, and then you will see him. And Catherine, I am sure, will be delighted to find you here. I don't think I have delivered half the 'loves' to you and your daughter which her letters have contained."

"Well—really if I do not trespass I will stay. Aline is writing her German exercises, and will be glad to be left at them in peace."

"And my husband is shut up busy with his plans,—I shall quite enjoy your company."

Mrs. Freeth spoke with absolute sincerity. Her visitor was a very pleasant, friendly neighbour—one of those people who would, she was sure, rejoice in the rising fortunes of the family, and here was a charming opportunity of communicating the important news.

And when speedily, by some convenient and ready *àpropos*, the leading fact of Mr. Freeth's change of position was mentioned, Mrs. Brind-

ley apprehended the situation with accuracy. Moreover, in the future which was dawning, a vista of consequences was defined to her far more clearly than to her hostess. But not the less heartily did she offer her congratulations, and *she* also spoke with absolute sincerity. She liked the Freeths, but thought they would be far more likeable rich than poor.

Mrs. Brindley had known grave sorrows in her life, yet was she a cheerful, ready-witted woman; and, having seen much of the world in different countries and among many sorts of people, she had a fund of shrewdness and worldly wisdom. But she was not a reading woman—not a woman who wooed or cherished any high ideal; not venerative, but rather the contrary, loving power and influence, and liking to lead and feel herself a chief, as people with considerable self-esteem and self-will are apt to do. She never railed at the world, but, indeed, thought it a pleasant enough world for the generality of people, supposing they had pretty good health, and rather good looks, and were not exactly poor. As may be supposed, she had very little pity for sentimental sorrows,

and having the smallest amount of aspiration after those high delights which on earth are rarely, if ever, realized, she was singularly equable and cheerful, being seldom or never bowed down by disappointed hopes.

Mrs. Brindley's voice was not unmusical, though treble-toned, and of a character that reminded one of an instrument kept always at concert pitch. Some people fancied that there was a ring of insincerity about it, but that suspicion was a harsh one. She took people as she found them, and usually made the best of her opportunities, like many another "woman of the world," past, present, and, no doubt, to come. Though decidedly a talker, she was not an ill-natured gossip or scandal-monger. She never bruised a reputation by dark hints or innuendoes, but was generally ready to put a fair instead of a foul construction on events that seemed mysterious. Once, when she was complimented on this amiable trait of character, Mrs. Brindley admitted that she made it a point of conscience thus to act—it was a doing as she would be done by, from which she hoped never to deviate. And as Mrs. Brindley was by no

means in the habit of talking about her conscience, the little sermon had the more weight.

In her teens she had married an officer in the Indian army, but he was not the object of her first girlish attachment. Major Brindley was old enough to have been her father, and though he understood that he had a younger rival, he had still wooed perseveringly. Quite suddenly he was rewarded. Susan Karvill had been brought up by a guardian who favoured the addresses of the Major, but could not positively coerce his ward. One day he had interviews with the two suitors for her hand—subsequently an interview with the young girl herself, the immediate result of which was a swoon, from which she passed into a fit of tears and hysterics. But three days afterwards she accepted Major Brindley's renewed proposals, began her preparations for a speedy marriage and a voyage to India, and appeared to have transferred her affections with astonishing facility to the now legitimate object of them. And indeed she made him, during the dozen years of their married life, a faithful, companionable wife.

These were the outlines of her history, with

which her old and intimate friends were familiar; but she was a comparatively recent acquaintance of the Freeths, who had known her only since her return from India as a widow, to claim an only daughter, who had already been sent to England for her education. Achilles had his vulnerable heel, and Mrs. Brindley had one strong affection in her seemingly unimpassioned nature. She loved her daughter with true maternal devotion.

"Really, it seems like a dream," said Mrs. Freeth, after enumerating some of the changes which were impending.

"Rather the bright and pleasant realization of a dream, I should think," replied Mrs. Brindley; "surely you must often have fancied that old Mr. Freeth would some day or other make amends for his former parsimony."

"I hardly know, I am sure. When we were first married, I did wish and hope for more money, and built fine castles in the air as to what I should do with it. But now that we have struggled through so much, now that the elder children are so nearly educated, life altogether seems different. Of course, to know that

one has competence is a wonderful relief; and I have plenty of wishes which money may gratify. Yet I feel—though I am afraid I am a little ungrateful—that I almost wish the increase of income were less, so that we need not make any great changes.”

“My dear,” said Mrs. Brindley, who, though somewhat the younger of the two, always slightly petted and patronized her friend, “you are ungrateful, if you so little heed having plenty of money.”

“Oh! I should wish to have plenty of money.”

“Well, then, what is it that makes you only half pleased?”

“Do I seem only half pleased? Why, that is very like what Hubert said to me this morning. I suppose it is my nervous apprehension of new scenes and new people. And the last few months—ever since our landlord did up the house so nicely—we have been so happy and comfortable, and now to have to look out for a larger house is such a trouble; and Hubert requires so much.”

“I remember he has often complained of

want of room ; and really a man does require a den of some sort, if only that a woman may keep the rest of the house fit for civilization."

"He is very good," mused Mrs. Freeth ; "he knows that I hate litters ; but from something he said this morning, I am afraid he has often stayed at the office when he could have worked at home if he had had what you call a den. Even his dressing-room has Gilbert's bed in it, so that he can hardly call it his own."

"He is a model of a man to have put up with so much inconvenience, I am sure. Now, for my part, I should think it quite delightful to begin the house-hunting and house-furnishing under the present pleasant circumstances."

"Should you ? Oh ! then, dear Mrs. Brindley, will you help me with your judgment and advice ? I shall feel so grateful if you will !" And the usually placid little lady pressed her friend's hand quite energetically.

"You do me honour, I am sure. But I must consider the subject. I doubt if I am altogether equal to the occasion."

"Oh ! yes, you are. I have often heard my husband cite you as particularly clever and

sensible, and what he calls practical. And Lionel and Catherine will be sure to think what you do right."

"They are very kind and complimentary," returned the lady; and she continued, "How glad you will be to have your eldest daughter at home again, particularly just now! Why, she has been absent three months, has she not?"

"Very nearly; and Phoebe and Jane have been almost at a stand-still with their studies meanwhile. But when once her aunt gets her down to Five Oaks, she seems always unwilling to part with her."

"No wonder. A lively and accomplished girl like Miss Freeth must be a great acquisition in a country house."

"Well, I suppose so; especially in a house far from a town, and with few eligible neighbours. Only it is dreadfully dull for Kate—no young companion except her cousin Reuben. I am sure I wonder she has been prevailed on to stay so long."

"Young Mr. Appersley farms his own estate, does he not?" said Mrs. Brindley.

"Yes; he lets one or two small farms, but

superintends the rest of his land himself. His minority having been such a long one, the property was well nursed, and it really is very valuable now. He seems to have all the tastes of a country gentleman. I suppose he inherits them from his father—indeed, he is not the least like a Freeth. But a very good fellow nevertheless.”

“I suppose your daughter likes a country life?” observed Mrs. Brindley.

“No; I should not consider her fond of the country,” replied the mother, after a moment’s consideration, “though she likes it now and then for a change. But she has always been Mrs. Appersley’s favourite niece, and her aunt expects to see her at least once a year. However, perhaps very few young people have a genuine love for the country—do you not think so?”

“Well, really, I have never thought much on the subject,” returned Mrs. Brindley, “yet I think I have heard you say Mr. Appersley has that taste, and he is quite young, I believe?”

“Only three-and-twenty, and certainly he is passionately fond of the country; indeed, to a

degree that is sometimes of education. He fancies—and his mother has grown to be quite as prejudiced—that there is no hospitality, no sociability in a great town, and what is a more serious accusation, very little religion or morality.”

“Ah! he is an exception to your rule, then,” cried Mrs. Brindley, “and very likely his prejudices will wear away in time.”

“I think not,” said Mrs. Freeth, “for having been so happy as to love a country life in his youth, he can hardly fail to love it still better as he grows older. Besides, he has been a ‘little great man’ from boyhood, and being an only child, of course the idolized darling of his mother. He must really be very good, or he would have been quite spoiled long ago.”

“Happy Reuben Appersley,” said Mrs. Brindley, with that sort of sigh which seems somehow related to a smile, and forgetting at the moment the sage’s advice to call no man happy till he dies, “happy Cousin Reuben, to have acquired so early a taste for simple pleasures and an indifference to town temptations!”

“Well, as for simple pleasures, I don’t know.

He is a keen sportsman, and rather fond of horse-racing," replied Mrs. Freeth.

"Most country gentlemen are, I think," returned the other lady.

"To be sure Reuben does not bet," continued Mrs. Freeth, feeling that it was but just to make this declaration; "when he came of age he solemnly promised his mother never to risk a guinea on a horse. This pledge was a great relief to her mind, for her husband had lost heavy sums on the turf. Therefore even though Reuben sometimes owns race-horses, he never bets."

And in this friendly, confidential chat, the time glided on, till a neat, clean, but homely-looking woman-servant came in to lay the supper cloth, and the hands of the clock showed that Catherine and her brother were nearly "due."

And now there were too many expectant hearts and listening ears for the cabman to have any occasion to knock. At the sound of his wheels the little passage and doorway were crowded by a loving family group, eager for a kiss from the truant, and even "papa" crept

out from his plans and letters, to take his beautiful daughter in his arms, and hug her in a fatherly embrace. Then the younger girls clung about her lovingly and caressingly, hardly giving their mother a chance of attention; and Gilbert, who had been upstairs in the nursery, slid down the banisters, and made a sort of leap at Catherine's neck, knocking off her slightly-fastened travelling-hat as he did so.

Well, she is all the readier to have her portrait taken, for no sort of head-covering ever seemed to improve her. Perhaps a tiara of diamonds gleaming upon her abundant soft dark hair might have looked fitly placed, but nothing less regal would have been likely quite to suit her style of beauty. The hat removed, one saw that her hair had been twisted coronet-wise about her head, so as to be neat and compact for travelling. But the chance style was very becoming. It showed to advantage her delicate ear, her broad and femininely-formed forehead, and revealed the perfect arch of her head. Her eyes, of the deep blue of the harebell, were only really seen when fully raised, so thick and long were their dark lashes. Her

nose was like her father's, only the aquiline outline more delicate; her complexion was brilliant without being too florid, though just now flushed from excitement; and her mouth, though not very small, had a beautiful expression. If it be true that temper and selfishness, and generosity and self-control, "make the mouth," then Catherine Freeth's had shown, hitherto, only the lines of fair and beautiful moulding.

She was very lovely—there could be no question on the subject. People might say, "not my style," or, "too tall for a woman"—I believe she was five feet seven—but they could not deny that she was a beautiful type of a grand style of beauty. She did not look quite her height, her figure was so symmetrical. And she had a white and soft, not very small, but perfectly shaped hand—just the hand to set off bright rings, and that could wear six or seven at a time without looking overloaded.

"Is your luggage all right?" asked Mrs. Freeth, as her daughter placed a pretty little travelling-bag on the table, and prepared to loosen her cloak.

"Oh, the man knows what there is," she cried; "and, besides, Li is looking after it."

Now, there was a negative peculiarity about Catherine Freeth, which is worth recording. She never fussed and fumed about the small daily affairs of life. She did not over-order and over-advise people; but, on the other hand, it must be conceded that she had a certain manner of authority, which, though all the while gracious, gave weight to her directions, and seemed to impress them on the minds of those whom they concerned.

It was not quite everyone in the family to whom Lionel would willingly have given up time and paid attention. He was a little like Catherine in some respects, and somehow people never expected him to wait upon them. Of course, on all fit occasions he was ready with the courtesies of a gentleman; but he was just the reverse of that sort of person who is asked to fetch and carry, and be generally useful in a household. However, Catherine's packages were not very numerous, and, as Lionel had no squabble with the cabman, his duties were soon over. Mrs. Freeth, whose hearing was of

the keenest, knew by the tone of the man's "Thank you, sir," that her son had overpaid him, and rebuked Lionel for his lavishness.

"I know, mother," he replied, "but there was the luggage; and besides, what does it signify? Perhaps some poor woman who can only afford sixpence will be his next fare."

"And then he will be insolent to her," said Mrs. Freeth, in a tone of yet deeper regret.

"No, he won't; he'll strike the balance of his night's work, and so let her off fairly. Ah, Mrs. Brindley," he continued, as he perceived their neighbour, and relieving himself of his sister's shawls as he spoke, "this is kind of you to be here to welcome Catherine home again."

As he shook hands with the lady, he instinctively glanced round the room, though perhaps she only was aware of the searching look.

"And Teddy, and baby, and dear old nurse!" exclaimed Catherine. "I have seen everyone else; where are they?"

"Here," said a voice near the door; and Teddy, with a shawl wrapped round him, his bare legs suggesting that he was just ready for bed, and a thin, pale woman about five-and-

forty years of age, carrying an infant in her arms, appeared among the group.

"Oh, Janet, you have disturbed baby," said Mrs. Freeth.

"No, ma'am, she was awake, and so I could not help bringing her down for her sister to see."

But before Catherine took baby Lucy in her arms, she stooped forward to kiss the faded cheek of the nurse; and the woman, speaking with the tremor caused by tears of joy, whispered the words, "My darling pet—my blessed one!"

Janet Gillespie had been Catherine's foster-mother, and was no common servant and no common friend.

CHAPTER III.

JANET'S DARLING.

Her eyes as stars of twilight fair,
Like twilight's too her dusky hair ;
But all things else about her drawn
From Maytime and the cheerful dawn.

WORDSWORTH.

AN hour later, and Catherine had said "good-night" to all her family, and was tripping lightly up the narrow staircase to the little attic bed-chamber which had been hers for years. There she found, just as she had expected, the gas alight, and Janet Gillespie busy unpacking and arranging for her darling's comfort. Now was the true greeting of the loving two who had been parted for three months, for the blooming girl took the pale woman in her

arms, clasped her fondly, and kissed her first on one cheek and then on the other, after the pleasant foreign fashion, showering on her the while merry loving words.

"Now, you dear, naughty old thing!" she exclaimed, "you ought to have been in bed long ago; you know what the doctor said about early to bed when you were so ill last Winter. Let the box rest till morning. I shall only suffer you to sit up ten minutes, and I want all that time to look at you and talk to you. Yet stay—I had almost forgotten—there is a parcel for you, a present from Aunt Appersley, with some messages from her. If I forget any of them to-night, perhaps I shall remember them in the morning."

"Mrs. Appersley is always so good—I am sure I don't know how——"

"She does not wish thanks from you, I know," exclaimed Catherine.

"But indeed I do thank her from my heart for all her kindness, and I ought to say so."

"Now, Janet, do you think no one cares for me but yourself?"

"Oh, Miss Kate, what an idea!"

"Well, then, suffer people to be conscious of what they owe you."

"What do you mean, Miss Kate?"

"I mean this, Janet—Aunt Appersley declares that three times, under God's providence, you have saved my life."

"Once, perhaps," admitted the nurse.

"No, three times. First, when I was two months old, and you happened to be travelling in the same stage-coach with your own healthy baby; then I was apparently dying, and you took pity on me, not for fee or reward, only out of pure womanly compassion;" and the high-spirited Catherine was visibly affected as she spoke.

"Mrs. Appersley must have been telling you this old story over again," replied Janet—"no need, I am sure. I hope she told you, also, that she had my poor baby, as well as you and me, at Five Oaks one whole Summer, and that I was treated more like a lady than a hired servant. I remember it all as if it were but yesterday."

"I was going there, was I not," continued Catherine, "to have my life saved somehow, if possible, and they persuaded you to stop?—that

is how it all happened, I believe. I never knew my own little history so completely till my aunt told it me one day last week. Then, when I was a naughty child and played with fire, you prevented me from being seriously hurt, though, in tearing away my flaming clothes, you were cruelly burnt; and you gave me the port-wine in the fever. I remember that myself; and though the doctor said it had saved me, mamma cried and sobbed, and afterwards declared that if I had died it would have seemed like murder."

"The Lord directed me, and you were restored."

"Well, well," she continued, "you must know how we all love you; and, as for Aunt Appersley, I am sure the little presents you have from her sometimes give her more pleasure to send than you to receive."

"She is only too generous to me," said Janet, untying the string of a brown paper parcel as she spoke.

"It is my fault if you do not like her present," said the young girl, "for she consulted me about it, and I told her I thought for some

time you had been wishing for a black silk dress."

"That is true, my dear—but, oh! what a beautiful silk! It is almost too good for a servant to wear."

"I will not have you call yourself a servant;" and, as she spoke, Catherine stamped her foot in playful mock anger.

"But I am not ashamed of service," continued Janet. "Why should I be?"

"I cannot tell; I only know I don't like to hear you talk of yourself in that way. And as for dress, nothing, in my opinion, is too good for Mistress Janet Gillespie, of that ilk, widow of Archibald Gillespie, the great actor——"

"The poor strolling player," interrupted Janet, with a sad smile.

"Nonsense! I know he was a great actor, just as well as if I had seen him. Well, then, Mistress Janet Gillespie, *née* Campbell, daughter of the great Presbyterian preacher——"

"Who broke her father's heart by her disobedience!" exclaimed the nurse, again interrupting.

"I don't know; the broken heart mended it-

self sufficiently to keep up its animosity for a dozen years, and make you miserable all the while, if I remember rightly."

"Oh! Miss Kate, my poor father thought he was only doing his duty by setting an example of firmness and severity. And he would not meet my husband,—would not judge for himself."

"Well, well, nothing is too good for Catherine Freeth's dear old nurse. That settles the question. But I hope, Janet, black is what you really wished?"

"My dear, I scarcely ever buy anything else."

"I know that; still I hope that you do not consider a gift of black unlucky."

"My dear, I am not so silly."

"Oh, but you know you are a little superstitious, and too Scotch not to believe in the second sight."

"Be content, my darling, I have no second sight now."

"Are you quite sure?" said Catherine archly; "quite sure that you have no vague presentiment, no dim foreshadowing about anything?"

"My dear, what do you mean?"

"Nay, nay, prophets should not want prompting;" and as she spoke, Catherine busied herself with unplaiting her long hair, drawing it almost like a veil across her face.

"My pet," said the nurse, after a slight pause, and looking searchingly at Catherine the while, "my pet, what has happened? I know you have something to tell me?"

"Well, perhaps I have; though I hardly think, Janet, that to you it will be a surprise, whatever it may be to mamma. The truth is that I have a letter from Aunt Appersley to papa, but knowing its contents, I felt that I could not give it to him in the presence of Mrs. Brindley. And then, after she left, I saw how pre-occupied mamma and papa were, how full of new and exciting interests; and they both complained of want of sleep last night, and so I thought,—I thought at any rate my aunt's letter should not be a new cause of wakefulness to-night."

"Mr. Reuben?" asked Janet Gillespie, almost in a whisper; "is it anything about Mr. Reuben?"

"Yes, Janet, Cousin Reuben wants me to

marry him; and even Aunt Appersley, proud Aunt Appersley, begs and prays that her niece and namesake will become her daughter. And Janet," continued the young girl, throwing her arms round the nurse's neck, "if I had not talked gaily and giddily when I first came into my room, I know I should have burst into tears, and frightened you, as perhaps I am doing now."

And the bright, beaming Catherine dashed the tears from her eyes as she finished her little speech.

"Then you are engaged?" said Janet, inquiringly.

"Not quite formally engaged," replied Catherine; "but still I feel that I have implied consent, subject, of course, to my parents' approval. Reuben drove me to the station, and he took advantage of the hour's *tête-à-tête*. He looked so miserable when I hesitated; and when he made me own that I had an affection for him, he declared that brotherly and sisterly love was impossible, except between brothers and sisters. And so—and so at last I said something which satisfied him. Then he gave me the letter,

which it appeared his mother had prepared,—foreseeing, I suppose, that I should not be able, at parting from him, to resist his pleadings. But now that I come to think it all over, it seems so sudden and startling that I almost feel frightened.”

“My child, do you love him?—that is the question.”

“Love Cousin Reuben? Of course I do, dearly and dearly, like a brother, as I told him, though not in the same way that I love Lionel, after all.”

“Not in the same way that you love Lionel!” exclaimed Janet, in a tone of relief.

“No; because their characters are so different. If I ever vex Lionel, his vexation rebounds on me, and hurts me till I am the more pained of the two. But Li and I never really quarrelled in our lives. When we differ, I generally think, in the end, that he must be in the right.”

“And Mr. Appersley?” asked Janet, smiling.

“Oh, when Reuben and I have a difference of opinion, it does not follow that I am wrong and

that he is right. Nevertheless, he is so good—and generous—and affectionate——”

“That you are going to be his wife,” said Janet, filling up the pause. “Truly,” she continued, “to be the wife of a good man, and mistress of such a pretty place as Five Oaks, seems a bright destiny, even for my darling.”

“Then you wish me joy, Janet?”

“That I do, always. Only, my child, be sure, be very sure that you really love him. If you doubt yourself on this point, draw back while there is time.”

“Certainly I love Cousin Reuben, who has been good to me all the days of my life. And yet it seems strange to fancy myself his wife. Perhaps I only feel that ‘I’m o’er young to marry yet,’ as somebody says in the song. Or is it that hardly a year ago I fancied that Reuben was in love with Hester Otway; but Aunt Appersley says it is a mere dream of mine, without the least foundation.”

“Mrs. Appersley would never have consented to such a marriage,” said Janet, gravely.

“So she says; and I believe Reuben is too good a son to have disobeyed her. But is it not

hard that poor Hester should be despised on account of her father's fault?"

"The sins of the fathers are visited upon the children," said Janet, solemnly, and with a sigh.

"Yes, yes; and I am afraid so surely that we ought, if possible, to shrink from being the instruments to punish them. If Reuben and Hester had been really in love, as I once fancied, I am sure I should have tried hard to coax my aunt to receive her. However, Reuben vows I am his first, real, earnest love, though he owns to one or two flirtations. Now, Janet," she continued, "I want you to lay auntie's letter upon papa's dressing-glass stand, after Gilbert is up in the morning. With so many things on his mind, I don't think reading it to-night would increase papa's chances of sleep."

"I am afraid delaying it may make you wakeful!"

"What does that signify?" returned Catherine, "After all, I believe I ought to consider my fate settled. As dear Reuben asked me to marry him before he knew of our recent good fortune, it would be mean to say 'no' now. I am sure

[illegible]

Dear Li! It would have been very nearly as hard to keep anything from him, had he in the least degree inquired of me, as from you. I believe he has made up his mind to be Lord Chancellor some day or other. I suppose he has been reading as hard as ever?"

"Pretty nearly; but he has taken to chess-playing for recreation."

"I wonder at that. We used to play together when we were children; until one evening we both settled that it was not play at all, but much harder work than our lessons."

"Then I suppose Miss Brindley plays very well," observed Janet, "for when she is here they generally want the chess-board; and sometimes Mr. Lionel goes round to Mrs. Brindley's, and I fancy for the same object."

"Aline Brindley a chess-player!" exclaimed Catherine, in a tone of surprise, and resting the comb in her lap. "She must have learnt the game since I went away, for I am pretty sure she did not know the moves last Summer. I suppose Lionel has taught her what she knows. But to play chess as he would wish an antagonist to play, is about the last thing I

should have expected of dear little Aline."

"I don't understand much about it," said Janet, "but I was in the parlour one night when they were just beginning, and I heard her say something about your brother giving her two or three pieces."

"It is the stupidest thing on earth to play in that way; I have heard Lionel say so a dozen times. But, of course, he would not play with Aline Brindley in any other manner,—unless, indeed, the fairies helped her; she always looks as if she belonged to them."

"She is a sweet young lady," observed the nurse.

"Oh, a child yet, hardly sixteen," replied Catherine.

"That is to say, two whole years younger than yourself," said Janet, with a smile.

"Ah, but I always looked older than my age; and with Aline it is precisely the reverse. She is still—or was three months ago—childish in manner, though clever, I think, and with a little fund of positive wisdom for those who know how to get at it. Perhaps, after all, Lionel may make a chess-player of her. But now,

Janet, really and truly you must go to bed. Here is the fateful letter ; but take care Gilbert is out of the room before you place it, lest he should ask questions or guess at a mystery."

CHAPTER IV.

FIVE OAKS.

That casement arched with ivy's brownest shade
 First to these eyes the light of heaven conveyed.

ROGERS.

Where cawing rooks hold parliament
 And leap the antlered deer.

C.

WHILE the elder members of the Freeth family are preparing for rest with hopes of the sound slumber which Catherine had desired should remain unbroken ; and while Mrs. Brindley is explaining to her daughter how lucidly Mr. Lionel Freeth had, in a few words, set the law of her rights and wrongs before her, touching the question of a lease she had signed

—we may, by dint of a little thought-travelling, pass some hundred and fifty miles towards the west of England, and make acquaintance with Mr. Reuben Appersley, at the moment when he parted from his cousin Catherine at the Drakesdale station.

Catherine had journeyed home in charge of some “friend’s friends” resident in a neighbouring town, and for whose coming to London her aunt had wished her to wait. Therefore, what most truly deserved to be called last words had been spoken as Reuben helped her out of his phaeton. But he stood till the latest moment near the railway-carriage in which his cousin was seated, with his arm resting on the edge of the window; and though his words were few and disjointed, and perfectly free to any ears that chose to listen, Catherine was conscious of his lingering looks, and of the lingering pressure of his hand as they finally parted. When railway guards intervened with their “now, then,” and the train began slowly to move in cautious preparation for attaining its express speed, Reuben still remained on the platform, and, indeed, continued gazing till the

red lamps, already lighted, only faintly glimmered in the distance.

The handsome young squire—as Reuben, for ten miles round, was called—looked the “picture of health;” and the hopes, and fears, and fervid emotions, which had lately coursed through his mind, brightened just now and refined his countenance. Nearly six feet high, and “built” in perfect proportion, he was decidedly an athlete; not the vulgar athlete sculptors too often give us, all thews and sinews under the control mainly of brute passions, but an athlete of the St. Christopher sort. Yes, Reuben had a tender heart, and, like the Canaanitish giant, he loved far better to lend his strength to the weak and suffering than to expend it in vain feats.

Perhaps there was a little indolence—or slowness that looked like indolence—in his character; mental indolence, possibly, rather than physical, though it may be remarked that, notwithstanding his love of out-of-door life, Reuben was but little of a pedestrian. Accustomed to horses from his early boyhood, and always having the control of them, it never seemed to him worth while to walk anywhere. His fair complexion

bore the ruddy hue of one who spent many hours a day in the open air; while his white, even teeth, shown directly he spoke, suggested the idea that fresh air had a bleaching effect more to be relied on than any other dentifrice. A nose well shaped, but a thought too small for the face; honest blue eyes; and a quantity of fair hair, which grew fast, and seemed always blowing hither and thither about his forehead, completed the picture of the outward man.

Had you listened to him as he made some commonplace remark to the station-master about the weather, while he re-arranged the collar of his driving-coat, to protect himself from the keen wind that would be in his face as he drove home, you would have detected a savour of provincialism, a twang of the west-country drawl. Yes, gentleman as he was—and Reuben Appersley was every inch a country gentleman—he had not escaped the lifelong influences of the district, and truly it might be said of him that “his speech bewrayed him.”

A country gentleman he was; yet not exactly of that privileged order of gentry whose members are at due seasons the companions of

princes, and whose training is, as the training of courts ought to be, always more or less cosmopolitan. I am writing of nearly twenty years ago, and Reuben['] belonged to an order whose ranks were even then sensibly thinned. Since that period, instead of being only sensibly thinned by the reaper Death, the order has well-nigh faded out of knowledge. Not only has no new generation arisen to be stiff-necked and strong with their father's bristling prejudices, but middle-aged men have been converted to new principles, and have voluntarily laid down the weapons of argument which they had used so fiercely in their hot youth.

Among his country neighbours Reuben was considered a very well-informed and polished gentleman; but in reality his information was one-sided, and "polished" would probably have been the last epithet a courtier would have applied to him. He was too kind-hearted, too simply unaffected, too unconscious, in fact, that there was anything in speech or manner for him to affect, ever to be vulgar; but the town-bred world of his acquaintances, on the rare occasions when he had mixed in it, had some-

times called him a "rough diamond,"—good-humouredly, of course, though behind his back, for Reuben Appersley had noble qualities, which made people, even though they quizzed him, like him all the time. There was something fresh and hearty about him, something which, if you saw him sitting on a silken couch in a London drawing-room, would still seem to you like a breath of the hedgerows, still call the mind off from the associations of a crowd to country downs and the wide-spread canopy of heaven.

Reuben Appersley's principles were those of Church and State as by law established. He had a quiet impression that "things in general" had been pleasantly settled in 1688 by William of Nassau; but Macaulay's fervid pages had not yet been universally read, to make the word "Revolution" respectable even to country gentlemen. As he had read Scott's novels—scarcely any other works of fiction—and only school-book history, of course, he had a lingering liking for the Stuarts, and settled in his own mind that, after all, Hampden was a troublesome fellow, not unlike those desperate Radicals

who had been the leaders of the recent anti-corn-law league.

He was well acquainted with all the stock arguments in favour of "protection," but he perpetually ignored all that could be said on the other side of the question. He had looked upon the recent triumphs of the free-trade party as the loosening of a bolt that was to bring down an avalanche of ruin upon England. Individually he was prepared to suffer; but really and truly his own interests affected his judgment as little as might be. At the most, they only lent a slightly magnifying power to the coloured glasses of prejudice through which he looked.

Of course he despised the manufacturing classes—cotton-spinners especially—and when he gazed upon his own fields, golden for harvest, or talked with his tenants about the state of the crops, he felt a proud superiority, a kind of innocent vain-glory, an ample consciousness that he, and such as he, the growers of food, the owners of land "that is always there, sir—the only real property in the world," were truly the "lords of the creation."

Now Reuben Appersley's political opinions are important to remember, not only because they wove themselves intimately into his life's history, but because they offered, in some sort, a key to his character ; as, indeed, a man's political opinions generally do. With equal opportunities of forming a judgment, and making the nearest approaches to absolute truth, see how different minds will diverge and arrive at opposite conclusions ! Making largest allowance for the force of circumstances, few people will deny that, nevertheless, there are born conservatives and born rebels, although it is sometimes equally true that the rebel is but its opposite seen the reverse way.

Wide-minded, far-seeing people, who never link themselves quite closely, or for long, to any party, and who are called changeable because they are always developing, generally gather up the finest grains of truth which are threshed out in the contentions of extreme partisans.

Reuben had never been so happy as he was at this moment ; and, certainly, his happiness was fully to be accounted for and reasoned about, had he happened to be in a reasoning mood,

Ever since he could remember he had loved his cousin Catherine; but now he was "in love" with her, and she had just said a sufficiently intelligible "yes" to his suit. A sufficiently intelligible affirmative; for Reuben was a man who would never have been grateful to a woman for sparing him the trouble of much wooing. He abhorred a forward minx far more than he did a skittish horse; he thought a prize well worthy a warm pursuit, and though, of course, when he had perseveringly wooed, and by an offer of marriage ratified his earnestness, it was then quite proper for the intended wife to have a little parcel of love ready to present to him in return, he had not that sentimental faith in the elective affinities which would have pardoned a too early betrayal of regard in the woman he was seeking.

Possibly one woman in the world—a woman still young, though a year older than himself—had lost her opportunity of accepting or rejecting his hand because she had not exercised a complete control over cheeks and voice and manner. Complete control, I say, for Hester Otway, reared under the dark cloud of a great family

trouble, and hated by Mrs. Appersley, had never, in reality, overstepped the barriers of maidenly reserve. During the short period when Reuben was certainly attracted toward her, he never perceived any tokens which he thought too encouraging. But his mother, who dreaded the alliance beyond measure—his mother, with what she deluded herself into believing was loyalty to her son, but which, in truth, was cruel disloyalty to her fellow-woman—pointed out a hundred little traits which she exaggerated into proofs of forwardness and eager readiness to be sought. Truly, to have exercised the complete self-control would, in Hester's case, have been the archest sort of coquetry.

As Reuben let his pair of thoroughbred horses take almost their own pace on the well-known road home, a thought of Hester Otway did once cross his mind. A steep hill recalled to his memory an incident in which she had been concerned; but the thought was a very fleeting one, accompanied by a feeling of surprise that he ever could have enjoyed her society so much. To-day Catherine reigned supreme in his heart, wholly and solely the presiding influence.

Every faculty of his being seemed subject to her power. Her voice, dwelling in his ear, was like rich music rising round about him; her image floated before his eyes; the light pressure of her hand on his arm seemed still a reality; and a glove she had not yet missed—but which bore, shell-like, the impress of her fingers—lay nestled near his heart.

Reuben Appersley was not a poet; no training, no circumstances could ever have converted him into one; but there is a period in the lives of the most prosaic people—provided that they do not belong to the utterly Bœotian order—when a sealed-up sense seems for a little while opened. I should be sorry to believe that there are many men who have not had, at least, one brief love-fever and dream of romance, however hard and stern and practical in later years they may have grown. And Reuben was just now, to a certain extent, under the spell of love's sacred delirium. To a certain extent; for it is only the nature which has "music in itself," which, when loving ardently, with the passionate fervour of youth, is winged away in the

fever-dream to the divinest heights of the empyrean!

Thorough-bred horses on a return journey make swift work of their nine or ten miles task; but Reuben had a commission to execute for his mother, and a question to ask one of his tenants, which, together, delayed him a full half-hour, so that the Winter twilight was fast deepening into night as he came in sight of the five old trees which gave a name to his house. The moon, near its full, was growing silvery in the frosty air, and making the already leafless trees look weird and spectral; while bright stars were leaping out to mark the constellations, and a few white fleecy clouds—now obscuring, now unveiling the lights of heaven—were sailing rapidly high aloft, as if bent on some urgent mission which earth was too ignoble to learn.

The Five Oaks were situated about half a mile from the house, towards which the most ancient of the group—a little advanced from the rest—always seemed to lean and point. The land was level now, rich and loamy, and well sheltered by rising ground from the north and

east. The spacious red brick dwelling would, I think, have puzzled an architect to classify. Once it had been the Manor-house of the district; afterwards it was tenanted for a generation by a well-to-do farmer, who built his barns and stables close to his house, and brought his poultry and pigs into something like proximity with the parlour windows. It is true that when the worthy farmer died, and Reuben's father—having just succeeded to the property—determined to dwell in the old Manor-house himself, he changed some objectionable arrangements, and re-converted the dwelling into a gentleman's residence. He did more than this. He built a new wing, and added a clock-tower; the result was an incongruous mass of buildings, not exactly offensive to the eye, extremely comfortable and convenient to occupy, but which defied the rules of architecture and the canons of fastidious taste.

Perhaps the house itself was typical of that transition period in which Reuben Appersley was born, and more especially to which his youth had belonged. The homely, low-roofed chambers, with wide fireplaces and "dogs" for

burning wood, instead of ordinary grates, how different they were from the new library, which was very properly approached by three oaken steps, but which, when you were in it, you found swept upward to the height of the second story.

And the old-fashioned kitchen, with its red-tile flooring, and its rafters over head, its ponderous, ever-creaking smoke-jack, and innumerable bright copper pans—how it contrasted with the new forcing-houses, in which early strawberries and wonderful grapes were ripened; the gardener never complaining that the back of that same kitchen chimney passed right against its wall.

Mrs. Appersley had told her old servant, Rebecca, not yet to close the shutters of the long straggling parlour, which was the general sitting-room. A huge log had lately replenished the fire, and it sent up sparkles, which, in aid of the lamp on the tea-table, quite illuminated the room. At the end opposite the fire was an old square piano, which had belonged to Mrs. Appersley in her girlhood, when, after infinite difficulty, she had succeeded in mastering the

elements of music, and had achieved in practice the playing of a few simple compositions. For years past the piano had remained unopened, and condemned to serve the stubborn uses of a sideboard. Just now a white cloth was spread upon it, with a ham in cut, and a meat-pie in readiness to satisfy Reuben's appetite after his long drive. It was only between five and six o'clock, but early dinners were the rule at Five Oaks, and it was thought proper to call meals taken later than two or three o'clock in the day by other names. A bright silver tankard, however, suggested an idea of home-brewed ale, and some decanters half full of different sorts of wine, indicated that Mrs. Appersley was prepared with an alternative, should her son decline tea.

The side of the room opposite to the windows was decorated by a large picture—a full-length portrait of Reuben's father, standing by the side of a favourite race-horse. Beneath the picture was a slab, which supported a gold cup, bearing an inscription to the effect that it had been won by the beautiful bay above represented. There were people who rather wondered that Mrs.

Appersley thus kept perpetually before her this memento of the turf.

It is true that the cup commemorated a triumph—but it was the one triumph of a long career, the evil bait, the fatal lure which had led on to terrible losses, and to events which had all but compromised the elder Appersley's credit. All but,—and not quite; for if Mrs. Appersley's husband had been really disgraced, or had she believed that he deserved obloquy, she was the sort of woman to have asked for his name never to be mentioned in her hearing, and would have shut away out of sight every memorial of his existence. As it was, she would have thought putting away an article merely because it had disagreeable associations a culpable weakness, a degree of giving way to her feelings of which she ought to be ashamed. So she not only suffered the cup to remain in its appointed place under the glass shade, which was locked down to the bracket, but, at stated intervals, she herself brushed and polished the trophy.

Two or three less conspicuous portraits and the likenesses of two favourite dogs completed the

pictorial adornments of the room, which, being neither the dining-room nor the drawing-room, was made, on ordinary occasions, to serve the purposes of both. Above the tall chimney-piece, quite out of reach of moderate-sized people, were suspended two pair of antlers woven together inextricably in a deadly fight, and just in the state in which they had been found, nearly a hundred years ago, in what was then the park. Another relic of a somewhat similar nature likewise hung on the wall—grim memorial “that all creation groaneth.” It was the skull of a huge hound that had been pierced by a bullet, but through the fracture and through the eye-sockets some vigorous sapling had pushed its roots, spreading them out fan-like afterwards, so that the skull looked like a ghastly bead, threaded on several strings. Now, these bony relics were, undoubtedly, curiosities in their way; but to Mrs. Appersley they had a ten-fold preciousness, because they had been discovered on her husband's domains.

Mrs. Appersley was one who—unless they were obviously unworthy—attached an inordinate value to her own special belongings; and

hers was a trait which, with all its advantages and disadvantages, we see often enough in the world. Her husband, notwithstanding some grave defects of character, had been, in her eyes, a distinguished and superior man ; and as for Rueben, she considered him nearly perfection. The air of Five Oaks she always contended was the most salubrious in England ; the soil the richest and most productive. The fruit and flowers of the Five Oaks garden were incomparably the finest in the county, and the old house was, in her opinion, the most substantially built of any within twenty miles. No room she ever knew was so warm in Winter, so cool in Summer, as that in which we now see her watching for her son, as well as she could watch from a lighted room, looking out into the night. By dint of drawing a dark curtain behind her tall person, she managed pretty well.

The mother was anxious for her son's return ; anxious, that is, in the sense of "eager," for she had no doubt as to the issue of Reuben's pleadings. She had set her heart upon his marrying her niece and godchild—her namesake, too—for she herself was a Catherine ; the child, her judg-

ment and her purse had, in its babyhood, been instrumental in saving, now, in the brightest bloom of her young womanhood, seemed the most proper wife for her son.

Mrs. Appersley did not quite know her own heart, or understand from what mixed motives she had lately been acting. That she had always liked Catherine, thought highly of her, and, in a manner, petted her, is quite true; she could not help all this,—the girl so much belonged to her. But it was only on the recent visit, when she had fully realized the beauty and captivating qualities of her niece, that it had flashed on her mind—not, indeed, that Catherine was quite worthy of her son, for no woman she had ever seen seemed that—but that she had found a spell which might allay for ever a dreadful fear: a fear which had poisoned her life for nearly a year; a terror which had robbed her of sleep, and whitened her dark hair; which had made her flesh shrink, and her hands tremble,—the terror that her son, her darling, only child, would want to marry a woman whom she scorned and detested.

Want to marry, mark you; for, though Reu-

ben was, of course, legally his own master, his mother never acknowledged to herself such a possibility as his actually marrying without her consent and approval. But to contend with this dear child, to have to argue and expostulate, command and threaten!—the very thought of such things made her brain reel.

Certainly, Catherine had not a fortune,—that was a drawback, Mrs. Appersley admitted. Yet what more likely than that ultimately her father would be rich? Uncle Thomas could not live for ever, and—“shrouds have no pockets.” Surely it was among the high probabilities that, after all, the marriage of Reuben with his cousin would be a “good match,” even in the worldly point of view. And the girl herself was really charming. So the clever, strong-willed woman bent all the opportunities of Catherine’s protracted visit to the one purpose; and Mrs. Appersley schemed so well that the cousinly admiration which Reuben had always felt was fanned and fostered into an ardent passion. Even Catherine’s slowness to understand, her unreadiness to believe in the changed character of the love which was required from her, was all

turned to profitable account,—all insisted on as indications of the sweetest modesty and innocence and truth.

So now the mother watched expectantly at the window, feeling this day to be one of the most fateful in her life. A beautiful dog, of the retriever-spaniel sort, that was stretched before the fire, with cold nose pillowed on her silky paws, lifted her head now and then to listen, as if she, too, was conscious it was time for her master to return. Floss had attached herself to Catherine in a most demonstrative manner, but she had understood the meaning of packed boxes and general leave-taking, and ever since Catherine had last stooped to caress her—and, I am afraid, pressed her lips on the dog's shining head—Floss had remained what Mrs. Appersley called "sulky." Alas! many besides Floss have been called sulky, when they were only sorry; and I think it was a harsh judgment so to interpret the dog's listless movements, and her little moans—so like human sighs—after she had settled herself on the rug.

At last the sound of wheels was heard, and

the sharp ring of the horses' hoofs on the frosty road. Doors flew open in readiness for the young master's entrance, and before he reached the parlour, Floss was about his feet with wagging tail and looks of mute inquiry. The first glance at her son convinced Mrs. Appersley that her expectation was fulfilled, even before he spoke; though the first words he uttered after the room door had been closed behind him were,

"All right, mother; she consented to take your letter, and I am the happiest man alive!"

"Thank God!" ejaculated Mrs. Appersley with solemnity, and—a rare occurrence with her—bursting into tears.

"Why, mother—dear mother!" said Reuben, tenderly, and placing her in a chair as he spoke, "how is this? I thought you never had any doubt of my ultimate success, and now you behave as if my words were a great relief, and almost a surprise."

"No, no, not a surprise," returned Mrs. Appersley—"not a surprise. But when one has set one's mind on the attainment of an object, delay is irritating, and the final success very delightful. I suppose these are what are called

tears of joy. I hope I shall not make such a fool of myself again, for I detest weeping women."

"Well, mother, you do not belong to the class, I am sure," exclaimed Reuben, "and I can forgive you for participating so warmly in my joy. What a miserable thing it would have been if I had fallen in love with a girl you did not like! And Kate is so fond of you! We shall be such a happy family!"

"I hope so, I am sure; she is a thoroughly good girl, and easily guided."

"Oh, as for that, I would not have her much guided," observed Reuben.

"Well, well, not exactly guided; but young people want advice sometimes."

As Mrs. Appersley spoke, she was vaguely conscious that it would henceforth be often necessary to weigh her words very carefully before she uttered them; but perhaps she was unsuspecting that, now that her own main object was virtually attained, her ruling passion, the love of dominion, was already taking new forms, and shaping out fresh purposes.

"No, we would not have her guided and

controlled, nor altered in the least degree—would we, Floss?” he continued, speaking to the dog, which was again fawning about him, and patting it as he proceeded: “You jade, what is it you want to ask with your great brown eyes and your restless ears? She is gone—yes, I tell you she is gone—don’t you understand? You wish you could talk about her, Floss, don’t you, and tell me how much you love her?”

Reuben’s nonsense was not quite purposeless. He wished to give his mother time to recover herself before they sat down to their miscellaneous meal, or before discussing delightful details about twenty little affairs which impending changes would really make imperative and important.

CHAPTER V.

A BETROTHAL.

Lily of a maiden, white with intact leaf,
 Guessed through the sheath that saved it from the sun ;
 A daughter with the mother's hands still clasp'd
 Over her head for fillet virginal.

ROBERT BROWNING.

HUBERT FREETH was an intellectual man, with faculties apparently well-balanced, and powers as yet but rarely overstrained. His good fortune, therefore, had done its worst in one direction, and was not likely to deprive him of a second night's rest. He had gone to bed, after Catherine's return home, with a vague notion that if he had but a sanctum—as he would have before he was many weeks older—where a fire could always be ready laid for light-

ing, and a patent apparatus for making coffee be likewise prepared for his use, he should rise for "work" the next morning long before servants were stirring; and yet he really overslept himself. Indeed, he remained unawakened by little Teddy's trotting about overhead, or by the buzz and stir which in a small house always declare that the family is rising betimes. Healthy, happy children are like little larks, ready to sing, or chirrup and flutter with the morning dawn; and though their early merriment has broken many a precious slumber, why, that is better than that a young child should be prematurely saddened by over-quieting.

Probably Hubert Freeth was well accustomed to nursery noises; at any rate, Janet Gillespie had the fit opportunity for taking his sister's letter to his dressing-room before he was stirring. How Catherine's heart beat, as, while making her simple toilette, she listened for a familiar sound—her father's bang of his door!

She heard it at last. She could count how many seconds would elapse before he must see her aunt's letter,—not how many minutes it might occupy in being read; for she knew only

its purport, not the detail of expressions in which her aunt had indulged. She wondered how her mother would bear the surprise—or whether, indeed, it would be such a surprise as she had imagined! Had she done wrong in delaying the delivery of the letter a night? Had she done wrong at all under the present circumstances of her life? Catherine paused awhile in the plaiting of her hair, and sat still to think, until she was nearly benumbed in the chill attic, and was glad to wrap a warm travelling shawl about her. I think she remembered the yesterday morning, when she rose in a certain sunny room, which had mysterious communications with the conservatory pipes.

Presently she heard her mother's foot upon the stairs, and the next minute Mrs. Freeth was in the room, and clasping her daughter in her arms. She too was only half dressed, but she could not delay, between her tears of joyful emotion, putting questions to her child—setting them between blessings and ejaculations—but, it must be owned, not always waiting for replies. Mrs. Freeth could be energetic enough when her feelings were deeply concerned.

"Object, my dear! That could not possibly be the case. Indeed, if the offer had come a week ago, I am afraid it would almost have turned my poor head. And, indeed, as it is, it is a good match, a great match for you, my child. A really good position—equal even to your father's changed condition—and without the uncertainty and anxiety of a profession."

"Reuben is very good," said Catherine; "and from childhood we have been the best of friends. And, mamma, I am sure he loves me very dearly."

"Of course he does, or he would not want you to be his wife. After all, that is not very surprising; you are not frightful, my dear, or stupid, or ill-tempered. Only Mrs. Appersley has shown more real sense, perhaps I should say more generosity, than I gave her credit for, in wishing her son to marry early, and in being so well satisfied with his choice."

"I cannot tell you," replied Catherine, "how kind my aunt has been to me during this last visit, and yet, when I think of what has passed, it all seems like a dream. One thing, however, I have made Reuben promise, and that is, that

he will not claim me very soon or very suddenly."

"Ah, I am glad of that," returned the mother; "for we want you—indeed we do—we want you at home more than ever just now. And, besides, though I rejoice at your prospects, the parting from you will be a trial when the time comes." And as she spoke, Mrs. Freeth again grew tearful.

"Dear mamma, we need not talk about the parting yet," said Catherine, her arms still clinging round her mother's neck; "and papa," she continued, "busy papa; will it distract his mind to think about my little affairs?"

"Your papa put his sister's letter into my hands with but few comments; yet I could see that he had not an objection to make, and he said that Uncle Thomas would certainly approve of such a marriage. But hark! there is the breakfast-bell ringing, and I am in my dressing-gown still. We are all so late this morning; and if Phoebe and Jane attempt to make breakfast, they will half empty the tea-caddy."

"Do not mind me!" exclaimed Catherine.

"I am sure I cannot be ready for some time yet."

And it was quite true that Catherine was much too agitated to expedite her toilet; and when, at last, she was dressed, a strange shyness came over her, and made her dread meeting her family. She wished Janet would come to her, and comfort and encourage her, till she remembered that the old nurse was always busy with the younger children at that time in the morning.

Then she reasoned with herself, and determined not to give way to such foolish feelings; and she had opened her bedroom door, and was standing on its threshold, when she saw her father coming up the narrow staircase. Yes, it was "busy papa," who understood the natural emotions of his dear daughter, and had waited for her, not wondering at her absence from the breakfast-table that eventful morning. Be it remembered, he was not called to the rescue of the tea-caddy.

There was a smile on the father's countenance as he took Catherine in his arms, but he only said :

"My pet, no one knows yet but mamma and I."

"And Janet," whispered Catherine, who loved accuracy in all things.

"Ah! well,—then of your own telling, my love. But come to breakfast now; I am to expect a letter from Reuben himself to-morrow, am I not?"

"Yes."

At the breakfast-table, Lionel—dear, unsuspecting Lionel—talked delightedly of his own changed prospects; and Phoebe and Jane apprised their sister that they were going to have a proper governess, instead of learning lessons with her. And though Mrs. Freeth looked guilty of a secret, her children, intent on their own special interests, regarded her less than usual that morning.

Very sacred was the interview between Catherine and her parents, which speedily followed; they extracting from her the particulars of her recent visit. Very straightforward and affectionate was Mrs. Appersley's letter to her brother, in which—though she wrote like the elder sister, and somewhat authoritative mem-

ber of the family that she was—she nevertheless did justice to Catherine's deserts while asking her as a wife for her son. And very honest and manly and heartily lover-like was Reuben Appersley's own letter, which arrived by the next day's post; and when Hubert Freeth prepared, in due form, to ratify his daughter's engagement by his written consent and approbation, it was not without visible and joyous emotion that he traced the necessary lines.

Truly the cup of worldly prosperity, which, for long years, had been so sparingly supplied, seemed suddenly sparkling up in bright bubbles towards the brim. Hubert Freeth felt more vividly conscious than ever of the capacities of himself and his children for the enjoyment of wealth, and of their fitness to occupy prominent positions in society. Thanks to that mathematical order of mind which, when allied to some imaginative powers, loves to foresee and pre-arrange the sequence of events, he found himself, half involuntarily, even planning a future for his intended son-in-law—a future which should lift him to a greater distinc-

tion than that of a mere country gentleman.

In the prime and vigour of his expanded mental faculties, Hubert Freeth hardly comprehended natures less intellectually active, less persevering, less ambitious than his own; while there can be no doubt that his forced abidance in the shade, during the years of early manhood, had rendered him now keenly—too keenly—alive to the glittering charms of prosperity. And if with this prosperity—closely allied to it as the contingency of its existence—was the certainty of great personal labour to be performed, why, so much the better for such a temperament as his. For the toil, he argued, was intellectual labour, that would be paid for thrice—in the yellow gold, the want of which had hitherto so cramped his purposes; in the world's applause; and in that personal influence which is dearer to most men than they are willing to allow. He felt assured that such conditions would combine to form the very atmosphere needed for the expansion and development of his being.

“Needed for the expansion and development of his being!” An oracle like that of Delphi

might have propounded the phrase. But the heathen priestess of old always pointed with her indicating finger to far-off results, and shrouded with the cloudy incense of mysticism the tortuous approaches to the goal!

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. BRINDLEY CALLED TO THE RESCUE.

Let's contend no more, Love ; strive nor weep.
 All be as before, Love—only sleep !
 What so wild as words are ?—I and thou
 In debate as birds are—Hawk on bough !

ROBERT BROWNING.

CATHERINE FREETH is avowedly engaged to her cousin, Reuben Appersley, and the fact has been duly announced to various relations and a few intimate friends, if not with the forms and ceremonies of the protocols which declare the betrothal of a princess, yet with something of a Tyburnian imitation of the same. The first marriage in a large family of quite young people is always an event that interests friends

and acquaintances a little more than the subsequent ones, and calls forth proportionate "felicitations."

Lionel's articles are cancelled, and he is preparing to be entered at the University of Cambridge. Meanwhile, he is recreating himself with a little hard reading, occasional chess-playing with Aline Brindley—he only gives her a rook and a pawn now—and talking with his sister Catherine about Five Oaks, and her late visit. He thinks Cousin Reuben an excellent fellow, and a lucky one also, to have won his handsome sister. But the dash of surprise with which he first heard of the engagement has not yet quite worn off.

Gilbert has grown so well used to his watch, that various new wants are looming up in his mind. The little girls are rather idling their time, as the new governess is not to be thought of in the old house. But a mansion in Westminster is already taken, and named Telford House; upholsterers are busy furnishing it—so busy, indeed, that, but for Mrs. Brindley's aid in keeping Mrs. Freeth's energies alive by timely promptings and friendly persuasions, the little

lady might really have succumbed under her new responsibilities.

Mrs. Brindley enjoyed playing the part of adviser and suggester, for her judgment was quick and clear, prompted by the plain, broad aspect of events, and generally undisturbed by that habit of looking all round a subject which is apt to make even very clever people wavering and undecided. The power of clear and rapid judgment was just what Mrs. Freeth at present valued, and often leaned on, in her friend. She yielded in most things to Mrs. Brindley's shrewder nature, to her supposed knowledge of the world, to her even cheerfulness, and to that ever ready but indescribable tact which society tacitly rewards in a thousand unmistakable ways. Moreover, as Hubert Freeth thought highly of their friend's judgment, his wife, by acting on it, felt partially relieved from responsibility; and this was frequently a compensation for having her own wishes thwarted.

Mrs. Brindley was often called kind-hearted, perhaps because she had a good-natured readiness in performing slight services; but she never

made herself miserable about other people's troubles, simply because she was deficient in imaginative sympathy. She did not enthrone the thought of a sorrow in her mind, and then turn upon it coloured glasses and a magnifying lens. Nay, in the case of her own troubles, she had wrestled with them, and trampled them down, and always dwarfed them as ideas. And she was too equable in disposition to be hard or severe, except in the cases where the granite of her self-esteem or strong will had been rudely struck.

She would never have made such an admirable poor man's wife as Mrs. Freeth had done. She would have wearied of the monotony of the daily routine, of the domestic drudgeries, of the home-life that must be led, of the grey atmosphere of her surroundings. She was aware of the fact, and was therefore able with sincerity to compliment her friend on her past career,—without finding it necessary to add that she thought herself the better able to spend a large income judiciously.

But sovereigns and their prime ministers do sometimes disagree, though their alliance may

have been for a given time very harmonious. Mrs. Freeth yielded with a tolerably good grace to the purchase of furniture more costly than she considered necessary, and comforted herself with the idea that it was still property. It was touching the engagement of servants that she and Mrs. Brindley strongly differed, and that the sovereign mistress asserted her prerogative, and proclaimed a "veto." She—such a manager as she was—would never throw authority out of her own hands by engaging people who—as you could see at a glance—would not condescend to be taught; not to mention the extravagance of the wages demanded. And when Mrs. Brindley suggested that it was desirable for her to have servants who did not require teaching, and that the difference of cost was more apparent than real, Mrs. Freeth answered irritably, and her adviser offered no further opinion.

Had Mrs. Freeth realised to herself what was the truth, right principle would have prevailed in spite of any temporary mortification to ensue. But she was not introspective, and did not analyse the sort of shy fear she felt; shy fear of

those well-mannered upper servants who applied in answer to her advertisements, and seemed so much more at home in a fine house than she did. But, in reality, efficient, well-trained servants are by no means to be had for the seeking, and least of all are they eager to aid in the formation of a new establishment. A mistress with wider experience than poor Mrs. Freeth could boast, might have had her troubles on the occasion ; though, doubtless, they would have been less momentous.

Before the family had been a month in the new house, Mrs. Brindley was called almost despairingly to the rescue. The new servants were incompetent ; their mistress found herself incapable of training them to duties which were new to herself, and the blunderings of the cook on the occasion of the first dinner-party brought matters to a crisis.

Hubert Freeth had wished his party to be a success—it was a miserable failure. Not that the guests cared very much about the soup being cold, and the sauces bad, and the made dishes common—for there is a spice of evil in human nature which finds consolation under

such circumstances in thinking "We do things better." But the host was mortified as he perceived a succession of disasters, and chilled in spirits, so that he could not guide the conversation as was his wont. His wife felt that something was gravely wrong, and it was in vain she tried to check her apprehensions. The evening dragged on wearily, and for the first time in her life she dreaded being alone with her husband.

As the time for this crisis drew near, new causes for her terror accumulated. In the drawing-room guests first tasted the thick and nauseous coffee, perhaps silently admired the pattern of the china, but put down their cups only half-emptied. The young and inexperienced Catherine saw vaguely that something was wrong; and using instinctively a subtle gift which goes so far in making the brilliant woman of society, she flitted from one lady guest to another, some little gracious speech appropriate to each individual being ever ready on her tongue.

People who have not this gracious gift are very apt to call it by hard names, and talk emphatically against flattery and insincerity; but,

in truth, no egotistic or selfish person can possess it, and there need be no insincerity in its use. Cannot the same woman honestly like music and painting and poetry, and be interested in horticulture and infant-schools and semi-political and social questions? And why should she make conversation a dull game of "cross questions and crooked answers" by talking of the right things to the wrong persons?

But the crowning disaster of the evening was discovered as the last lady was departing. A stupid housemaid, unused to the care of costly garments, had dropped tallow—yes, tallow—on a cashmere cloak, and though the well-bred owner, with many "oh, never minds," tried to smile away Mrs. Freeth's distress, as the hostess herself assisted to remove the dreadful flakes, it was evident that the evil taint was nauseous to her in the extreme. She breathed more freely when Catherine had poured half a bottle of eau-de-cologne about the lining.

A servant was fastening the street-door as Mr. Freeth said, "Good-night, my pet," kissing Catherine's cheek the moment afterwards, and his daughter knew it was her father's way of

dismissing her for the night. Then Hubert Freeth closed the drawing-room door behind him, and the dreaded moment had arrived.

I do not mean to say that the Freeths had never had a mutual fray of temper, never a little swift dispute which left the matrimonial atmosphere all the clearer afterwards, like a sudden shower in April, which shows the serene unchanged blue sky the next minute. But Hubert Freeth had never before been deeply vexed by the conduct of his wife, and he had now a strange feeling at his heart which made him hope that he should be able to restrain himself—able not to say bitter words, which, because of their truth, would never be forgotten.

No doubt it was a smallness in a sensible man to be thus gravely annoyed at the trivial mischances of a dinner-party; but I am afraid it was a smallness of which greater men than Hubert Freeth might have been guilty. For the true Englishman is a social and sociable creature, generally given, more or less, to ostentation in his hospitalities, and keenly alive to ridicule. And we must remember that Hubert Freeth was just

beginning to move freely in a desired and congenial sphere, from which poverty had hitherto, in some measure, debarred him.

"Bessie," he exclaimed, leaning his arm on the corner of the mantelpiece, and looking down at his wife, who was bending her head over her lap, and smoothing out the lace border of her handkerchief—"Bessie, this must never occur again."

"What must never occur again?" replied the wife, in a trembling voice, which showed that she was at least unused to artifice or subterfuge.

"Tush!—such a question is unworthy of you," said her husband; and he continued—"You know as well as I do that everything has gone wrong, although I told you to spare no trouble, no cost, that the dinner and attendance should be perfect. I think I never was so mortified in my life."

"You say everything, Hubert," exclaimed Mrs. Freeth, catching, as it were, at a straw; "I am sure I heard several gentlemen praising the wines."

"With which you had nothing to do. Bessie,

you must get a better cook ; and give that girl who spoilt the cloak her wages, and send her off to-morrow."

"Oh, Hubert!" sobbed Mrs. Freeth.

"Well, if you care for the girl so much, make a scullery-wench of her, but don't let her touch a shawl or a cloak belonging to my friends again."

"*Your* friends!" exclaimed Mrs. Freeth, with bitterness at least equal to his own, and emphasising the pronoun.

"Well, *your* friends, then—our friends—the terms ought to be synonymous. But that disaster reminds me,—I am sure I heard Mrs. Brindley recommending you to use only wax lights ; why did you not follow her advice?"

"Hubert, *do* you know what wax candles cost?"

"No, but I see that families in our station use them. If they are a guinea a-piece, say so, and then I shall, perhaps, limit the quantity to be consumed."

Mrs. Freeth pushed back her hair from her forehead in agonized amazement. This ironical spirit was something quite new, and for which

she was not yet prepared ; and it seemed a million times harder to endure than sharp petulance. Had she been a woman of spirit, she would doubtless have paid back her husband in something like his own coin ; but she was nothing of the sort. She was simply a loving wife, of gentlenature—only to be angereed through her affections—but over-careful, painfully timid, altogether narrowed by past circumstances, and with sympathies which appeared mainly engrossed by her own family. It was with a passionate burst of tears that she threw herself among the sofa-cushions, exclaiming—

“ Oh, that the last three months were a dream!—oh, that we were back in our old home, with only the old faces about us !”

“ Don’t talk so foolishly,” said Mr. Freeth, yielding a little from the severity of his manner. “ Bessie, don’t talk like a simpleton. I cannot forget, though you may, painful privations and humiliations, of which I am heartily glad to be rid. I remember the days when our only trouble was want of means, when, if we had ‘but money’—that was the phrase—we were to be the happiest people in the world.

And now that we have not only money, but friends crowding about us——”

“Friends!” cried Mrs. Freeth, with all the emphasis of interjection.

“Yes, friends—I mean what I say,” continued Hubert Freeth. “I am only just now really able to form congenial friendships——”

“Friendships!”

“Friendships and acquaintanceships,” he proceeded, “if I must be so explicit. And, indeed, social intercourse may be very pleasant without its ties being sentimentally stringent. I say people of honour and station are willingly our associates; the world treats us with consideration; our children are full of promise; no carking care is casting its shadow near us; and all I ask from you is to be happy yourself, and gracious and liberal——”

“‘Eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we die,’—I have heard you quote those words before now.”

“Bessie, I don’t deserve this from you. I might retort and warn you about the ‘heed for to-morrow,’ and Who has forbidden it.”

“I wish I were dead—I wish I had died

when Lucy was born, rather than live to find you so cruel!" exclaimed the wife between fresh sobs.

This little speech was a sharp arrow, and it went home; for Mrs. Freeth had been thought near death at the time to which she alluded. Hubert Freeth moved to the side of his wife, lifted her head from the cushions, and said, in a softer tone—

"Bessie, Bessie, I am not cruel, but I must be firm. I have not wished to say severe things, but it seems to me that gentle hints and mild persuasions were of no avail. I do not wish to interfere with your domestic management; my mind, as you well know, is fully occupied with far different things. Still within the last few weeks I have expressed my opinion many times. I have perceived many shortcomings, but I hoped each time that you understood me, and that things were going to be altered. Now I speak once for all—I must have the house quite differently managed."

Mrs. Freeth thought she could bear anything her husband might say, now that he was more tender, now that he had kissed her, and thrown

his arm round her. She was weeping still, but she looked up in his face as she said,

"Hubert, what is it I must do?"

"The small details have to be considered. How would you like," he continued—"how would you like Catherine to be installed manager of the house?"

"My own child to be set above me!" exclaimed Mrs. Freeth, shrinking instinctively from all that the suggestion implied.

"Well, well, not if you see the plan from that point of view. Only I could not help noticing to-night how greatly she has profited by her few opportunities of good society. It seemed to me that there was no one in the room who appeared more thoroughly well-bred; and she was so ready, so *à propos* in all she said and did; certainly the whole thing would have been a still greater failure but for her."

"But what can she know about managing a great house like this?" replied the mother; "and, besides, in a few months, I suppose, we shall be preparing for her marriage—and—and—No, Hubert, don't put my daughter as adviser

over me. I could not bear it—indeed I could not.”

“Well, then, have a professed housekeeper.”

“And be robbed right and left!” returned the wife.

“Indeed—indeed that does not follow.”

“Oh! Hubert, how should you know? Why, I declare I would rather sink into the mere housekeeper myself, and give up visiting altogether, than submit to such a proceeding.”

“What you suggest, Bessie,” replied her husband, “would be highly improper, if it were not, happily, quite out of the question. I wish you to consider your days of drudgery entirely over. I wish you to have a certain amount of leisure in which to read and improve your mind—at any rate, to keep yourself *au courant* of the general topics of the day.”

“Ah! I saw you were vexed because I knew nothing about that letter in the *Times*. How could I read the paper this morning, with such a party to prepare for, and when I made every bit of the pastry with my own hands!”

“That is just what you had no business to

do," replied Mr. Freeth, stamping his foot in the irritation of the moment.

"Once you would not touch any sort of pastry unless I made it."

Mrs. Freeth fancied this rebuke must be unanswerable, but she found herself mistaken.

"Once!" retorted Mr. Freeth; "yes, when there was no alternative between your doing such things and the hands of a maid-of-all-work. Now that I pay a cook forty pounds a year——"

"No, you don't," cried Mrs. Freeth, quickly. "I did not engage the woman you are thinking about."

"I am sorry for it. That accounts for a great deal which has happened to-day. Well, well," he continued, after a pause and a sigh, "you must think over what I have said. There must be a new leaf turned some way. I recommend you for the present to be guided entirely by Mrs. Brindley. If you could get her to stay with you for a little while——"

"No, Hubert, no—don't ask that. I am sick of hearing Mrs. Brindley's name. I suppose you think her quite perfection; but I wonder what

she would have done with seven children and such an income as ours was? Why, she said herself one day that she never could have made the appearance I did upon it."

"Quite true, I have no doubt—and a proof that she has not all your good qualities; but it was gracious of her to admit the fact, nevertheless."

"There—of course you praise her. She knows enough of Indian ways, and foreign ways, but what does she know about English housekeeping?"

"You forget," replied Mr. Freeth—"you forget that she spent some time in England when her husband came home on sick leave; besides, she was brought up in England. And I am sure you yourself were thankful for her advice not many weeks ago. As for the experience which travelling has given her, it seems to me of just the character which—don't be angry with me, Bessie—of just the character which you want. She has acquired a ready tact which enables her to adapt herself to new situations, without murmuring about trifles."

"It is easy enough not to murmur, with only

one child, who obeys her implicitly—and with no husband to please or displease,” said the wife.

“Then am I and our young flock only so many encumbrances?” asked Hubert Freeth, with rather a bitter smile.

“Oh! Hubert!” exclaimed Mrs. Freeth, throwing herself into his arms in a paroxysm of tears—“oh! Hubert, how cruel, how shockingly cruel, you are to me to-night!”

“Well, well,” returned the husband, “let both of us forgive and forget the naughty things which have been said. There—there, you will be calmer in the morning after a night’s rest, and better able to decide on many things that must be done.”

Forgive!—yes. The wrath towards those we love—that wrath which “works like madness in the brain”—we may bury fathoms deep, drowning the life out of it in the brine of tears; but there is a plummet of memory that will, in sad or unheeded hours, drop down and touch for an instant the ghastly thing, and send a shudder through the heart. And at such hours we know that to “forget” is not within the compass of our will. A tritely true saying, verily; and yet

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is there not something awful in the thought, that, of all our faculties, memory seems the one most clearly and distinctly touched by the divine hand? How often do we say in our pride "I will remember," and straightway we forget? In our sorrow we murmur "Oh! would that I could forget!" and the murmuring of the wish compels us to remember.

Perhaps we are more tenderly dealt with than we know, and that withered branches of sorrow, such as bear no fruit, no acorns of experience—no apples of wisdom, have been burnt out of memory to trouble us no more. How shall we tell that this is not one of the multitudinous mercies for which, from their very nature, we do not "remember" to be grateful?

With the calm, wakeful hours of a new day came full mutual forgiveness; but if Hubert Freeth and his wife could not "forget" this, the most serious disagreement of their married life, perhaps it was because it ought to be a fruit-bearing sorrow, which should teach him tolerance—and her, trust.

Notwithstanding Mrs. Freeth's over-night resistance to the plan, she did call in Mrs. Brind-

ley's assistance, and so far profited by her advice that no such *fiasco* as that of the first dinner-party ever occurred again. But the price which Mrs. Freeth paid for having this world-experienced and shrewder woman than herself to lean on, was that Mrs. Brindley became an influence in the house; and I take it that any extraneous influence dropped into a house on merely worldly—so-called prudent—considerations, is pretty sure to be a sort of serpent's egg that will get hatched some day or other, perhaps in an unexpected way!

CHAPTER VII.

A PLIGHTED PAIR.

Thy boyish spirit set a sail
 Which o'er smooth seas drave well its prow ;
 'Twas well, but from Life's rising gale
 Take warning now.
 F. NAPIER BROOME.

Seldom we mark the linkings of a chain,
 Although 'tis fastened to a jewel rare,
 And yet we know it but endures the strain
 The frailest of its little links will bear !
 C.

IT was not that parental affection had exaggerated Catherine's ready tact and grace of manner. She had profited by her opportunities of mental and social culture in a remarkable degree ; nor had these opportunities been altogether contemptible. With the view of qualifying her, if need be, to instruct her younger

sisters, she had been carefully educated, first at home, and afterwards, for a year or two, at a very superior school. Here she had formed girlish acquaintanceships which had rendered her a welcome visitor in two or three families of consideration. In more than one case she had been admitted to a house where there was refined hospitality without ostentation, and where learning was apparent without pedantry. Thus Catherine, young as she was, had already acquired a certain experience of society which prevented her from being dazzled by the outward show of worldly prosperity.

Perhaps young people are not so much imitative as open, in all their receptive faculties, to the various influences which are to combine and fashion forth the individual character. Catherine never consciously imitated anyone; but she was wonderfully ready to appreciate the best points of character and the best traits of manner, and all the knowledge which came to her she seemed to assimilate and make her own. It was the spring in her own nature—however enriched by tributaries—from which her charming manner flowed; that nature which, with all its

bright intelligence, was humble with the humility of a thoroughly unselfish character. Really, Mrs. Freeth might have done worse than yield the reins of government to her eldest daughter.

But though the mother's natural pride prevented Catherine from having nominal authority, she was, in reality, a power in the house. Every one recognised the sunshine of her presence, and, I believe, speculated on the difference her marriage would make in the family. It was she who somehow lightened the burden when "mamma" seemed oppressed by her multitudinous engagements; she who never forgot any of papa's behests, but quietly took care that they were obeyed; she it was who was Lionel's regular correspondent now that he was at Cambridge; and she was the first who, in solicitude for Phoebe and Jane, suspected the incompetence of the new governess. Busy also she was in many sweet womanly ways, for Mr. Freeth was liberal in his allowance of money, awarding her for pocket-money just twice the sum which her mother had thought necessary; and Catherine soon discovered that a wise bene-

volence is not to be exercised without trouble. But, then, trouble taken in such a cause surely bears interest in the lessons of life it teaches!

No wonder that friends, now and then remembering her betrothal, said that she did not look like an engaged girl. Now and then remembering,—for as there was very little happening to draw attention to the fact, it seemed to fade out of mind with a good many people. Even on the two or three occasions when Reuben Appersley spent a few days in London, her manner of life was but little altered.

To be sure, his absolute devotion, his eagerness to spend every hour by her side, touched her heart, and brought tears of gratitude to her eyes; Reuben thought they were tears of sweet, womanly affection, and kissed them away with a passionate rapture which rather frightened her. In his lover's mood her will was his law—he would go wherever she suggested, and do whatever she wished, even yield to his mother's entreaty to shorten his stay in "horrid London," if Catherine commanded him so to do. But must he—must he really abide by his promise to

wait for his bride a whole year? It was almost too cruel.

"But, dear Reuben," she replied, to some such question as this, "you remember that you promised not to hurry me; and indeed there are so many reasons why I should remain a little longer at home—so many more reasons than there were a few months ago, that I cannot—no, I cannot humour you."

As she spoke he was folding her hand in both of his, but she was looking up in his face with a smile on her own countenance.

"Many more reasons for delay," he answered with a sigh; "and they seem to me all reasons that point the other way. I am frightened lest you should grow to like London society——"

"Reuben, I do like London society," she exclaimed, interrupting him; "and I have often told you so. And you must not forget that you have promised to bring me to town every year. I must see the picture galleries and——"

"Yes—yes—I know all that you would say. But I dread your liking society too well; I dread some jackanapes—some fellow that lolls against

drawing-room doors, and airs his scented handkerchief to show its fineness——”

“Reuben !” And Catherine drew away her hand as she spoke, really hurt at his words.

“Well—well—I cannot help dreading that such peacocks may be brought into contrast with me. I have none of their gifts, but they are gifts which charm some women ; and there is a demon of jealousy at the bottom of my heart, which I wish to be left sleeping.”

“Oh, Reuben, I do not deserve this—give me up at once if you distrust me !” And she moved to a little distance, with just that touch of haughtiness which was a new grace in the eyes of such a man as Reuben Appersley.

“Forgive me—forgive me !” he exclaimed, as he flung himself before her, “only this once, tell me this once that you love me—love me and think of me with love when you are surrounded by those flatterers, and I will never say such words again.”

Catherine looked her candid answer—but that was not enough. He sued for speech, and dictated the words he wished to hear.

Catherine called to mind that it had been

said the making up of a lovers' quarrel was the renewal of love. But she denied the truth of the proverb. She wished she had never heard of that sleeping jealousy at the bottom of Reuben's heart. Sleeping things are sometimes so easily and so accidentally awakened; and she had a vague idea that a loving heart should be ruled by an angel of confidence, which would keep no lair in which jealousy could slumber.

Then his remarks about London society drew her attention to the fact that he was certainly different in various respects from many individuals whom she had found herself admiring. But people of any worth of character always appear to immense advantage in their own homes; and until quite lately Catherine had known her cousin almost entirely through her long visits to Five Oaks. In her early childhood he had been the "young squire," with an incipient and not quite conscious authority, which enabled him to exercise what seemed childish generosities, without much self-denial. Up to the present day even, there was no one in his own immediate neighbourhood who

was in the least likely to be brought into favourable comparison with him, so far as the graces were concerned.

The only "gentlemen" within many miles were the clergyman and the doctor. The Rev. Joah Darwin was the incumbent of a straggling parish, having in middle age succeeded to a college living. He had been sizar, and then fellow; and for a dozen years engaged to the patient and frugal-minded lady who at length became his wife. Patient and frugal-minded she needed still to be, for the stipend of the cure was small, and three little olive branches had made their appearance as speedily as possible; while in the far-spreading agricultural district, of which he was the spiritual pastor, there was always too much trouble of one sort or another—trouble, however, which always seemed to ask for material help—for him to have a spare loaf in his house, spare wine in his cellar, or a spare sovereign in his pocket.

But the good clergyman and his wife were enviably happy, nevertheless,—as people must be who, having seen that there are for themselves clearly defined and very noble duties,

have set about performing those duties in the spirit which recognizes them as privileges. The Rev. Joah Darwin was plain in person, and of shy, almost awkward manners in general society, though he was easy and eloquent enough in humble cottages or in sick-chambers.

Mrs. Appersley had a singular yet not inexplicable prejudice against country apothecaries, so that the homely but skilful Mr. Goodfield was never called in at Five Oaks but under the pressure of sudden illness, and never courted as a visiting acquaintance. Mrs. Appersley had very painful recollections of a country apothecary, but his name had been Otway,

The reader will easily understand how Reuben Appersley must have appeared to greater advantage among his own people, who looked up to a just and kind master as the pattern of gentleman-like perfection, than he could do in a metropolitan circle of acquaintances, whose thoughts were not his thoughts, and whose tastes were often opposite to his. It is painful to reflect that many men whose shining casts the "country gentleman" into the shade, might

be, and often were, morally, and even mentally, his inferiors; but there is a charm about the perfect *savoir-faire* of polished society which wins its way, and always influences refined minds more or less perceptibly.

The Freeths were now in polished and refined society, and, indeed, Hubert Freeth had never himself fallen quite out of its grooves. His professional talents had brought him into contact with the scientific minds of the age, and he had been a frequent guest of peers as well as of commoners of distinction. Men of intellectual powers generally require the invigoration of congenial society; but very early in his married life Mr. Freeth had recognised the impossibility of his wife's entering into society under the then existing circumstances. He was too proud a man to plead poverty in a lachrymose vein, but he was brave enough to be able to say, "I cannot afford" on proper occasions; while he had a very happy manner of excusing his wife from accepting invitations, on the plea of her maternal duties, without insinuating in the slightest degree that he was ashamed of his Bessie. It was surprisingly easy to have it understood

that Hubert Freeth was not tied to his wife's apron-string; for modern society is so breathlessly busy with its own urgent and immediate affairs that it cannot run into the next street after a merely modest, unobtrusive gentlewoman. If she appears on society's door-step properly presented, that is another thing.

Now it must be remembered that Mrs. Freeth was the mother of a marriageable daughter before she was so presented; and women verging on forty are slow to learn new habits of thought and new methods of life. She had made the home, into which only about half-a-dozen choice friends were ever invited, a haven of rest; but she found herself shy and troubled in a crowd of new acquaintances, and morbidly excited about trifles. After a few months had passed by, Hubert Freeth was constrained to own that his Bessie looked weary and careworn, and seemed far less happy than she had been in the days of comparative poverty.

On himself also there had come some new and unexpected troubles. Places of honour and influence are seldom softly cushioned, and in addition to his professional responsibilities, he

found himself beset by eager applicants for employment, encouragement, and more mysterious sorts of patronage. Though he had dropped many cares and burdens, he had certainly lifted up others; and it was only because he was better fitted than ordinary men to be a chief and a leader that he did not sink under them.

CHAPTER VIII.

HESTER OTWAY.

An honest maid as ever broke bread !

SHAKSPEARE.

“MAMMA,” said Catherine Freeth, one morning, to her mother, “I have just received a letter from Hester Otway, telling me that she is going to leave Lady Danvers in the Autumn, and she asks me to remember her, should we, in the course of the Summer, hear of anyone requiring such a governess as herself. Now, mamma dear, would it not be delightful for you to engage her for Phœbe and Jane, instead of having another stranger ?”

“I am sure it would please me very much,” replied Mrs. Freeth, “for you know, my dear,

how I dislike having strangers about the house ; but I remember hearing that Miss Otway had a hundred a year salary, and I do not see how I could offer her less than she has been accustomed to expect."

"Why, mamma, should you think of doing such a thing? On the contrary, I should offer her, on account of her experience, more than she has been receiving, instead of less—for the great pleasure of having money is that one can be liberal."

"That is just the way your papa talks," said Mrs. Freeth, with a slight acerbity of tone. "I am sure he need be made of money just now. And, really, Catherine, you should study economy a little more than you do. If you were not engaged to a man of fortune, I should quite tremble for you ; and, as it is, I do not think you should expect Reuben to have the same views about money as your father seems to have."

"Reuben is very generous, he has not a mean thought," replied Catherine, blushing at this necessity of defending him, but looking down and playing with her watch-chain, to conceal her emotion,

"That may be," returned Mrs. Freeth; "but you cannot expect he will supply you with money whenever you ask for it."

"*When* I ask for it he will give it me," said Catherine, gravely; "but," she continued, after a slight pause, "but that is not the question now, mamma. We all know Hester Otway, and like her, and she must be a good governess, or she would not have stayed so many years with Lady Danvers."

"Why is she leaving?" asked Mrs. Freeth.

"Because her pupil is considered 'finished,'" replied Catherine, smiling at the ideas suggested by the last word. Two years ago Catherine herself had been declared "finished." Yet now she comprehended that professed teachers very seldom do more than set the young mind on the track for acquiring information; and she thought if her old acquaintance could stimulate Phoebe to higher tastes than she had yet evinced, and could at the same time point out the fountains of knowledge, and satisfy the daintier thirst of little Jane, that Hester Otway would be like sunshine in the household.

It was a curious trait in Mrs. Freeth's charac-

ter that her "penny wise" suggestions for economy generally proceeded from her first impulses, and that she could often either reason herself or be persuaded into more liberal measures. From this it is fair to infer that, whatever her apparent narrowness, conscience never slumbered, or cheated itself in her heart. It was conscience that had once taught her to be penurious, and the habit of twenty years' growth was not yet shaken off. Very soon Catherine's arguments prevailed, and she was permitted to answer Hester Otway's letter by return of post, and suggest the arrangement she so much desired.

And here it may be well explicitly to state that the vexed question of the "governess's" rights and wrongs is not likely to be even mentioned in these pages. It happened that Hester's dependent position did not give the chief colouring to her life. Hitherto she had fulfilled her difficult duties with ability and discretion; and it had not been her lot to be insulted by her employers, or commiserated by their servants; she had never been denied the requirements of a gentlewoman, or treated with other

than courteous consideration. She had not fallen in love with her pupil's brother, or by her superior accomplishments rendered the lady of the house miserably jealous. In her governess capacity there was really no material for romance; and when the day came for her to leave a certain baronial residence, which for three years had been her home, lookers-on would have seen at a glance that a whole family were parting from a much-loved friend.

Hester Otway, it is true, was only the daughter of a country medical practitioner; but the very troubles of her family had snatched her from the narrowing influences of provincial society, such as it was thirty years ago. It had been a clearly-defined truth from her very early years that Hester must "get her own living;" and well-to-do rather than wealthy relatives had trained her to a profession as regularly and completely as if the woman's chief chance in life's lottery—as if marriage—was not to be calculated on as a probability that would disturb her honourable labours.

George Otway had lived and practised in a country town, within a few miles of Five Oaks.

He was a man of respectable family, and once of good private fortune; but he, like Reuben Appersley's father, had sporting tastes, and was better known in connection with the turf than became his position. He and Mr. Appersley were indeed boon companions and intimate acquaintances, perhaps friends, according to the capacity of both for friendship.

George Otway had been Mr. Appersley's sole medical attendant, in the sudden illness of which, under peculiarly painful and mysterious circumstances, he died. No blame attached to Mr. Otway's treatment of his patient; on the contrary, he was complimented at the inquest on the skill he was supposed to have evinced; and, certainly, Mr. Appersley's death affected him as a deep personal affliction; yet the widow neither showed nor expressed gratitude for his services.

It is true she had never liked him, always believing that he encouraged her husband in his betting propensities and sporting habits; and when, a few weeks after her own loss, George Otway absconded, leaving his wife and little daughter to the tender mercies of some distant

relatives, and his lawful creditors to share his effects among them, the proud Mrs. Appersley seemed to have no pity for a widowhood which some people thought more sorrowful than her own.

As for Mr. Otway's "debts of honour," perhaps rumour exaggerated, perhaps under-rated them. The true balance-sheet of those "liabilities" would not have been edifying to contemplate—save as a warning. And, somehow, those who most need such warnings never will receive them. Gamblers of all denominations, for the most part, work—as the pestilence walketh—in darkness; and I suppose no statistician will ever approximate to a knowledge of the sums of which wives and sisters and children are, day by day, morally defrauded, to minister to the craving for excitement of betting men. The habitual gambler is as incurable as the drunkard, save by the total abstinence system.

George Otway, or a man supposed to be he, was traced to London; but in the crowded thoroughfares of the metropolis the clue was lost. A vigilant policeman believed he had found it again in a boat that put off from

Gravesend, to overtake an Australian merchantman which had just weighed anchor. But descriptions were so contradictory, and the owners of the ship were so positive that no such person had sailed in it, that by degrees strong suspicion faded into vague conjecture.

From the morning when he had left his wife with a calm kiss, as if going forth merely on his daily round of visits, and when his little daughter of four years old had shrunk away frightened from his too tight hug and the rough chin which pressed against her cheek, George Otway, the handsome, jovial doctor, had never been heard of in any authentic manner. His poor wife met with kind friends, and never really wanted for the necessities and even comforts of life; but as years passed on, she grew heartsick with hope deferred, and heart-darkened by living in the shadow of disgrace. She faded and faded away, like plants which are kept in a chill and murky atmosphere, and died when Hester was barely twelve years old.

No one had ever been so cruel as to paint for Hester Otway her father's history in its

darkest colours, yet she knew enough to show her that she had been reared under the influence of a mysterious trouble, and that on her devolved the duty not only of keeping personally free from blame, but of wiping off, if possible, the stigma of hereditary blots. It was when visiting old friends in the old neighbourhood that in latter times she had met Reuben Appersley, and perhaps it was the certainty that he knew her history intimately, and yet treated her with that indescribable attention and respect with which a man can mark his admiration of a woman without a vocal utterance of it, which touched her heart, and kindled her imagination in regard to all things with which he was concerned.

Hester would have positively disliked Mrs. Appersley had she not been Reuben's mother. But the halo of his seeming perfections stretched far enough to include one so near, therefore, the freezing manner which the elder lady had adopted as significant of her dislike, Hester interpreted as becoming dignity, and because she was under a subtle but secret spell, she would have waged war with anyone who might

have pointed out a fault in Reuben's mother.

Hester's mind presented that curious combination which is sometimes found in highly cultivated people. She had a large amount of intellectual acquirements, with a great deal of simplicity of character; and probably it was this combination which made her a "good governess," and gave her influence over her pupils. Somehow, most children open out to generous, unsuspicious persons, and are influenced by them in the same sort of way as they are by the heroic characters of books, while they instinctively shrink away from the worldly wise, as beings with whom they are in an unconfessed antagonism.

Hester was too wholesomely and severely disciplined to be a dreaming sentimentalist; and yet, as week after week and month after month had passed by, the impression made had still been deepened. Active as her duties were, they still permitted short reveries, and these had been constantly nourished by winged memory, which was always flinging into the present some reflection of the past.

Hester Otway had but few correspondents,

and if any of them happened to be aware of Reuben Appersley's engagement to his cousin, they had not thought fit to mention it. She was wholly ignorant of the circumstance, even when she arrived in London some months later, and took up her residence in Mr. Freeth's house as governess to his children. Some other events, however, have to be recorded before we can look at Hester in that capacity.

CHAPTER IX.

ALGERNON RAYBROOKE.

There's that in his look
Which draws you to read in it, as in a book
Of some cabalist, character'd curiously o'er
With an incomprehensible legended lore.

OWEN MEREDITH.

A proper man as one shall see in a Summer's day.

A Midsummer Night's Dream.

ALGERNON RAYBROOKE had been the pet of a select circle during the past season. The pet, not the "lion," seeing that the qualities which it was confidently predicted would one day establish him as a leader among men were still only in the bud.

Those who had had good opportunities of

forming an opinion had always considered him a young man of mark—one who was likely to carve his way to fame and fortune by sheer force of talents and energy of character, backed, as they were, by an ancient and honourable name. Just that moderate fortune was his which makes a man independent with regard to his daily bread, yet sets the prizes of life before him in the alluring light by which shine all the bright things for which we have to strive.

This had been Algernon's position when he was "eating his dinners" at Lincoln's Inn, and by other mysterious methods qualifying himself to be a member of the Bar. But one February day the sudden death of a young cousin, by the upsetting of a felucca in the Mediterranean, rendered him heir-presumptive to a baronetcy, and to a rent-roll of ten thousand a year, provided the present baronet did not bequeath away from him that unentailed property, which, for two generations, had accompanied the title.

The news came to him through that winged sheet which carries, noisily or otherwise, so

many messages over the world—the *Times* newspaper. “How stupid the paper is to-day!” or, “There’s nothing in it!” we often say, because there happens to be nothing written of just then which touches our particular sympathies, or affects our individual interests. But is there ever a *Times* published that does not make some heart throb with agony, or leap with exultation—some brow flush with honest pride, some strong spirit quail with shame, or some woman weep those bitter tears which furrow the soul? Alas! could it be produced, a sheet so innocent of mischief would be voted duller reading than a school-girl’s diary.

Algernon was breakfasting in his chambers when a Mercury, of the order which waits upon bachelor students, brought in the damp newspaper. Its arrival was late that morning, so, instead of sipping his coffee and munching his hot roll while he read, as was his more usual habit, Algernon enjoyed the luxury of coffee and roll unchilled. Therefore, he had nothing to hinder a comfortable drying of the wet sheets by his bright fire, before he drew his cosy chair on to the hearth-rug, and prepared to enjoy that

morning draught of news for which an Englishman always pants.

It was before the day when insular England stretched, as it were, a brain-fibre beneath the sea, and linked her mind by the electric magic to the mind of all other countries. Wherefore news, though even then partly flashed, travelled more slowly than at present; and it was after much leisurely-turning of the paper, and at the end of a semi-political article from Leghorn, that the young barrister read :

“ A sad accident has occurred within the last few hours. A party of amateur sailors caught in a sudden squall have been drowned just off Spezzia; and one of the bodies already washed on shore has been recognised as that of a young Englishman, only son of Sir Richard Raybrooke, Bart. The bereaved father, who, by the advice of his physician, has been spending the Winter at Pisa, and Lady Raybrooke must, by this time, be acquainted with the melancholy catastrophe.”

Now, had this been a little scene before the foot-lights, no doubt the stage directions would have been for Algernon to start from his chair,

drop the paper, attitudinize gracefully, and burst into a high-flown soliloquy on the uncertainty of human life, and the caprices of fortune, with spasmodic ejaculations on the change in his own prospects. But Algernon only clutched the paper more tightly instead of dropping it, read the paragraph in which his kinsman's name stood out in seeming prominence, at least three times, and then, instead of talking to himself, leaned back in his chair in what a looker-on would assuredly have called a brown study.

"Poor Dick!" he thought to himself, "poor, light-hearted Dick, the spoilt darling of his parents,—poor Dick, who took life as easily as a butterfly, to die in that ghastly fashion, and so darken all the future of his parents' lives! Will they hate me, I wonder, for standing next in succession? Heaven knows I would try to comfort them if I knew how! But what word or act of mine could seem like genuine sympathy, to be accepted and believed in? Let me do nothing, at any rate, until I have the news more positively confirmed."

Yet, as once again he read the paragraph, he

found a clear precision about it, which left but small loop-holes for doubt; and with the calmness of a mind capable of being deeply stirred, yet which aimed too loftily to be greatly disturbed at the prospect of a remote advantage, however considerable, he recognized as a truth the change in his own prospects and position.

"No, there is not such a thing as an accident in the world," he mused, as future probabilities opened out in a long vista before him. "No, everything on earth must be overruled, though it may seem that many lives are to be influenced by, perhaps, the hasty tug of a rope, or a yard too much of canvas spread!"

Perhaps at the bottom of his heart a dangerous pride was roused—a pride half-blaspheinous in some of its aspects, and yet in others wearing the garb of grateful humility; a pride that mixed itself with his vague religious persuasions, because, indeed, it infused itself through his whole being.

However, whatever Algernon Raybrooke did, or did not do, with regard to proffering sympathy to his father's cousin, his conduct appeared to give such satisfaction as the bereaved

parents were capable of receiving. Sir Richard, not wishing his heir to be other than amply provided for during his life, settled a thousand a year on him at once; and in less than two months, Algernon found himself so well used to his new condition that the days of his darker fortunes seemed to lie far back in the past.

For, as his fortune had enlarged, and his prospects grown bright, so higher and higher had his ambition soared. Once it had been his intention to devote all his energies to his profession, and rise to distinction on the steep and difficult ladder of forensic practice. Yet ever at his heart a small voice had whispered one ominous refrain. He knew that he was gifted with powers of eloquence—needing, it might be, much training and cultivation—but that they were powers which would always be more or less dependent on the emotions of his heart, as well as on the acumen of his intellect.

Herein was betrayed the bit of womanly clay which had been needed to eke out a somewhat contradictory character. He was sincere, even when most wrong-headed. His fitful enthusiasms mounted like wine to his brain, not to

intoxicate or overthrow, but to set all the fine machinery of subtle reasoning and apt metaphor and forcible illustration at the high pressure, only to be relieved by "words that burn." Whereas, his mind seemed drugged by opiates, when, for the mere exercise of debating, he took up an argument in which he had not faith, and argued only for argument's sake.

The small voice had whispered that honours and dignities would be hard to reach by a pleader who could only use dexterously the sharp weapons of speech when fighting under the banner of what he believed to be right and truth. And yet he had set before himself that well-nigh impossible task. Doing so exemplified the dogged obstinacy and self-will which loved to surmount difficulties when they lay in his path.

Now, however, that professional success was not of vital importance, he yearned to devote his mental powers and gifts of eloquence to some cause in the service of which they would never need to be curbed. Very soon he decided that politics presented the best field for the exercise of his energies, and one in which

his past legal studies might prove of infinite service. Not only did Sir Richard Raybrooke approve of Algernon's aims, but he furthered the projects of his young kinsman by every means in his power. The result was that, a seat in Parliament having become vacant, Algernon Raybrooke was returned for it, not without a sharp contest, but still by a satisfactory majority.

The borough of Fordinghill, for which this young man of four-and-twenty was now member, was a post-town in Meadshire, in which county Sir Richard had property, and Algernon came in on what was called the Liberal interest. But Fordinghill was in a condition common to many towns a few years ago ; for the politics of the electors were finely balanced, and, had not the high Tory party been weakened by internal rivalry, and so split its interest by encouraging two candidates, it is likely enough that Algernon would not have been returned.

It was late in the session when he had taken his seat, and with great good sense he had contented himself with listening and observing and voting according to his principles. Judi-

cious friends approved of his reticence of speech; and when we consider that high hopes of his future had been entertained by his acquaintances before his young cousin's death, it may easily be supposed that his present expectations in no way detracted from his merits. In fact, this untried legislator and future orator was now widely credited with the knowledge and erudition, the ready wit and the embryo powers, not only of a distinguished parliamentary speaker, but also of a leading statesman.

Had he been of smaller mental mould, Algernon Raybrooke would probably have been spoiled by the petting of pretty women and the general praise and approbation of "society," which lately had been showered on him; but two advantages were his, which, acting like rival magnets, kept him in the safe mid-channel between the Scylla and Charybdis of intellectual and personal vanity.

He had always been considered rich in mental endowments, and from boyhood had been accustomed to the vigorous exercise of his mind. Therefore, for great things to be expected from

him came rather as a matter of course than with any novelty of idea. Indeed, his confidence in his own powers gave a tinge of haughtiness to his character, though it never degenerated to anything so enervating and transparent as vanity.

He was handsome ; and handsome men and women, when they are tolerably ballasted with brains, generally form the least " vain " section of humanity. For handsome people have no need to fume or fret about the trifles of dress—no need to patronize a fashion because they find it becoming—no need, in fact, to think about their own faces and figures at all.

Somebody calls dressing well—that is, becomingly and appropriately—a duty to society, but it is a duty easily performed by handsome people. It is the woman with a snub nose, and sallow complexion, and round shoulders, who finds the toilette arrangements a severe study, and who, in delight at a little success, becomes vain—vain with that not-so-bad-after-all self-congratulation which is the most treacherous starting-point from which vanity can rise. And by some analogous rule they are the unfortunates

of the other sex, who study neck-ties, and patronize advertisers' hair-dyes, and perseveringly cultivate contumacious whiskers, and have quarrels with their tailors; and, by dint of regarding themselves in small looking-glasses and large, and owning their deficiencies, make happy discoveries about their "good points!"

Young Raybrooke, seldom having cause for dissatisfaction with himself, was, it must be admitted, rather a sloven in his dress. Sloven, however, with a reservation, for he always looked fresh, and never seemed to soil like other people. He was adored by his excellent laundress for his munificent patronage, and the credit his fine linen was to her. But he often wore his coats till they were old, though such coats were always of an excellent cut; five times out of six he tied his cravat carelessly, and seldom relinquished a hat till it got damaged. But he had a trick of damaging his hats very soon, and the luck of always getting a new one wetted. Yet nothing made him look shabby; his gloves were never old or soiled; and perhaps he was a little particular about his boots. I believe the maker used to show them off in his

window, before sending them home, as patterns of shape and style.

Different people have different notions of what constitutes a handsome man, and of the characteristics which usually make up the darling of society. But Algernon's credentials passed muster with most people. To a fine person, above the middle height, and an animated countenance, was added a manner that was graceful and gracious, and was, at the same time, quite different from that of the dancing-master's-department school. No one could ever quite surely predict what he would do or say on any particular occasion—only it might be pretty safely relied on that he would do and say the right thing at the right time. His abundant dark hair, and his fine eyes, that looked almost black sometimes, but were in reality dark grey, seemed somehow precisely in manly harmony with his rich, sonorous voice.

In fact, he was the very opposite of the "loud" dressing *petits maîtres*, blazoned with jewelry, and scented like a perfumer's shop, who, incredible as it may seem, do occasionally

find women more foolish than themselves to do them homage.

After parliament was prorogued, Algernon paid a visit of a month or two to Raybrooke Park—shot a few birds—and made intimate acquaintance with a place destined to be his own; but it was now the middle of October, many people whom he required to see were already in town, and, moreover, he wished to be within reach of the freshest naval intelligence, in order to meet his younger brother, a midshipman in the navy, whose ship, after a long cruise, was daily expected in the channel.

Frank Raybrooke was a good-looking youth of nineteen, bearing a family likeness to his brother, though his hair was lighter than Algernon's, and his complexion naturally fairer. But he was bronzed by the sunshine of the tropics, and looked older than he was. In some respects he was matured in character, from having knocked about the world, and comprehended early in life the responsibility of having honourable duties to perform—but there was another side of his nature, which retained much of the simplicity and trustfulness of youth. Altogether

he was one of the most prominent young officers in Her Majesty's service, and though just now it is rather his *carte de visite* which is offered to the reader, than himself duly presented, we shall hear of Frank Raybrooke again.

CHAPTER X.

AT SHINGLEBEACH.

Azure lakes up in the cantons of clouds,
 Green sunny isles in the shadowy sea,
 Here and there vessels dim distance enshrouds.

Purple-clad heights fading off into grey,
 Woody chines going leisurely down to the shore,
 A white butterfly hovering o'er the blue bay,
 Low tinkling of sheep-bells behind on the moor.

Without silence no sound
 Of the harps which the spirits of life and love,
 As they float in the air and vibrate the profound
 Each tune in accord with the angels' above!

ROBERT STEGGALL.

AFTER the gaiety of the London season,
 Mrs. Freeth had pleaded, not for a continental tour or a sojourn at Brighton—but for

the family to be taken to a little quiet nook on the east coast, where she could throw off the burden of cares which, in these latter times, had pressed on her so severely, and during the yet long Summer days thoroughly enjoy the sea-side and the country. In her heart, she had grieved over the delicious June evenings spent in hot London drawing-rooms, and memory had gone back fondly to the earlier times, when, as a young and loving couple, she and her husband had made pleasant suburban excursions in a fashion that would have been revolting to the new world into which she was now introduced. She remembered moonlight nights at Midsummer-time, when she had gathered wild-flowers in Hampstead districts, or listened to the nightingale not a mile away from the rattling Greenwich train; and Richmond, to her, was an enchanted spot, though she had never eaten a fish dinner at the "Star and Garter." The river there had seemed to her like one of the rivers of Eden—which, alas! like those boundary waters, had an opposite shore not Paradisaic, and to which she always had to return.

Verily Mrs. Freeth had capacities for simple

pleasures, and sweet, yet deep enjoyments, but she was too old, when caught into the vortex of worldly pleasures and excitements, ever to thoroughly enjoy them. Through a woman's best experiences, she had worked out many little problems of life for herself, and had her little stock of wisdom ; but she was not a talker, not one who picks up knowledge through the ear, and, therefore, not even a first-rate listener.

Certainly, as soon as she had her husband's consent to her proposal, she looked forward to the sea-side sojourn with delight, and began making arrangements for it with energy and eagerness. And when Mrs. Freeth found herself comfortably settled at Shinglebeach, reality for once equalled expectation.

Fond mothers are always a little anxious concerning their progeny, and Mrs. Freeth was rather *exigeante* about the due amount of bathing and walking, riding and driving, which were considered orthodox occupations. She was a little "fussy" too in her preparations, when she expected "papa" down on a three days' visit ; and once when a birthday coincided with this gala time, the festivities considered appropriate to

the occasion taxed the entire resources of the household. After the London scale of expenditure, the Shinglebeach style of living seemed something quiet and soothing ; and now, for the first time since the sudden burst of her husband's prosperity, did Mrs. Freeth really appreciate their good fortune, and take pleasure in little indulgences, which had about them the charm of novelty. Little indulgences seemed to her far sweeter than sweeping changes and large expenditure.

Of course the life of the Freeths at the seaside was just the one which caricaturists love to make ridiculous ; and, even with the mother and eldest daughter for central figures, I know it would be a rash boldness to put in any lights and shades that should give the picture a touch of pathos. The mother grew so "bonnie" at the bidding of the sea-breezes, that her husband talked nonsense about hands on the dial of time going backward. Though her eyes still often ached, and rebelled if she over-taxed them, they were as softly bright as ever, and her complexion being good, and her figure *petite*, she looked a young woman still. And the daughter was an

English beauty in the perfection of her maiden bloom, with, nevertheless, that nameless something in her countenance which a physiognomist reads with limited prevision—seeing only that for the soul allied to such a face there is a real human life to be led, its rocks skirted or dashed against, its depths sounded, its storms to be encountered.

Now, there are both poetry and pathos in such a group lounging or reading, the children chattering and playing, while the “cruel, crawling sea,” comes up to their feet as quietly as hour follows hour in each quickly-passing day, the waves dashing the spray in their sunburnt faces, as if for a warning of old ocean’s power. But the caricaturist sees nothing but eccentric head-gear, and long, lank tresses, and stereotyped styles of human beings. In these days, when, as art-themes, pure domestic developments of character seem passing to the limbo of Arcadian shepherds and shepherdesses, and when, as a crowning achievement, a comic rendering of the Pentateuch should, perhaps, be expected to issue from the press, it would need a new St. George to poise a lance against the dragon of

burlesque—that dragon which really seems drawing to its maw, more or less successfully, the freshness and faith and fervour of a generation.

The eight or nine weeks spent at Shingle-beach formed a period of mental development to Catherine. It was a time of real leisure to her, in which she followed her instincts much as a bee does in roaming from flower to flower. She read much, and reflected, perhaps, still more. She was not fond of letter-writing, and consequently had few correspondents, though she wrote a good letter on a real occasion for one ; and had she lived a century earlier, when every woman of more than ordinary ability was expected to furnish folios of gossip to absent friends, and was forgiven all sins of pedantry, she would probably have been a noted letter-writer ! But with the “polite” letter-writer’s inevitable egotism, she would not have been quite the Catherine Freeth that she now was.

Of course she wrote frequently to her cousin Reuben, and chatty, cheerful, affectionate epistles they were, which flowed naturally from

her pen. Apparently, he thought them matchless pieces of composition, and he was eloquent in his praises of them—eloquent from hearty earnestness of expression; and Catherine was angry with herself that, on one or two occasions, she had been dissatisfied with his letters, because—because some sentence of passionate love had in it a word misspelt.

Now, a well-educated girl can forgive such a solecism in a friend, but in a lover—not. In her next letter she introduced the word twice, writing it very legibly. Of course he never noticed the difference—bad orthographers never do; but I think the unteachableness evinced by this want of observation offended her more than the original fault. And, again, she was angry with herself for her own displeasure, till, by an effort of the will, memory gathered, as it were, into a focus his many noble qualities and manly clevernesses, and she argued to herself that it would have been a greater defect to ride awkwardly than to spell “separate” with three “e’s.” Certainly, she thought of Reuben, and thought of her engagement much more than she had done while she was in town.

"Mamma," said Catherine, after a long pause, "do you not love the sea? Do you not think that coming here is the richest enjoyment papa has yet given us?"

They were sitting on the beach at the time, the younger members of the family playing about or sauntering near, Mrs. Freeth knitting rather lazily, and Catherine with a volume of Tennyson resting on her lap.

"Indeed I do," replied the mother; "and to think that, in all human probability, we shall have such a treat every year of our lives, seems something too delightful to believe."

"The children," replied Catherine, laughing, "will, I suppose, be better than well, henceforth; for, though we have not seen the sea until now for half-a-dozen years, we did not suffer in health very dreadfully."

"I wonder if I ever should weary of the sea-side?" she continued, after a slight pause. "I doubt it very much. Day after day, as I sit here, the sea seems to talk to me. Or is it like a great book that always opens at a fresh chapter?"

"Why, Catherine, you are quite fanciful this morning," returned Mrs. Freeth.

"I cannot help it, mamma. I feel as if I had grown since I have been here—as if the sea were always widening my mind and piquing my curiosity—hinting at all sorts of secrets, but never more than half revealing them."

And then she lifted the little green-covered book from her lap, and read over three or four of her favourite stanzas in "Locksley Hall." Did she picture herself as "Cousin Amy," I wonder—but without Amy's falseness or weakness? Or did she rise to comprehension of the lover's wail and woe?

In truth, Catherine—though she knew it not—had arrived at the most critical epoch in woman's career; that brief period in which youth is just recognised, and its elixir tasted before it vanishes for ever! That period in which, for a moment, time's horizon seems stationary, and the future is credited with mysterious joys; when life is coming upon us tumultuously, like a sea that rises higher at every tide, stranding all sorts of memorials with the advancing waves—shells that, though carried far away inland, shall

still whisper of the past; curious weeds inextricably tangled; a rounded pebble worth cutting and polishing, and, alas! it may be some sad token of a far-off wreck. And while we are ignorantly gathering up the spoil and waifs time lays at our feet, in youth a glad song seems sounding in the soul—but soon it is marred by a low, discordant voice, and we find that Hope cannot chant without awakening her sister, Fear!

It was Mrs. Freeth who interrupted Catherine's reading, or reverie, by observing:

"I like Miss Otway's letters very much. She seems to be very sensible, and, I have no doubt, will manage Phoebe and Jane better than I can. If we leave this place at the end of September, we shall be well settled at home, and ready to receive her, by the time she can come."

"Yes," said Catherine, "the girls will have had a long holiday, and the sooner Hester begins her new duties the better, I think. I expect great things from her, mamma, she is so clever, and has had so much experience in teaching."

"I am thinking," continued Mrs. Freeth, "that

we ought to leave off speaking of her by her Christian name. The children must be taught to respect her, and, though it was very well to address her familiarly when she was a school girl, the case is different now."

"Just as you like, mamma. But I am afraid if I call her 'Miss Otway' she will address me as 'Miss Freeth,' and that would sound very formal. To be sure she is much the elder, and, of course, has been used to a certain sort of deference. I suppose she must be four-and-twenty by this time. I know she was a great girl when I was a little one."

"I only wish, for the sake of example to the children, to show their governess proper respect," replied the mother, "and whether she calls you Miss Freeth or not, does not much signify, as you will bear another name so soon." And though a smile was on her face as she spoke, her words were accompanied by a sigh.

Catherine coloured, and answered promptly, "Indeed, mamma, I was not thinking of my change of name."

"But, my dear, I think of it very often. You

though I am delighted at your engagement, and would not for the world have your marriage needlessly delayed, of course I dread losing you."

"Dear mamma," said Catherine tenderly, and laying her hand on her mother's arm as she spoke, "Phoebe and Jane are growing up fast to fill my place—"

"But they are different from you," interrupted Mrs. Freeth; "or perhaps it is that no child can be like an eldest daughter."

"Also, none like the youngest!" exclaimed Catherine, laughing; "I heard you say so the other day, when we were all praising little Lucy."

"Did I say so? Well, perhaps I did. Still your being the eldest does make a difference."

"A difference—yes," returned the daughter, "and certainly Lionel and I must always be able to compare former times with now, in a manner the younger ones never can. But as for my marriage, mamma, I do not see that it need make much of a separation; I am sure I shall persuade Reuben to be often in London,—and

then you and papa must come every Autumn to Five Oaks, and that will be perfectly delightful."

"I wonder where we shall all be this time twelvemonth!" mused Mrs. Freeth.

"Sitting by the sea-shore, I hope, as we are now," said Catherine gayly; "and by that time I shall probably be wiser, and be better able to understand the mutterings and the roarings——" but she checked herself, lest it should again be said that she was quite fanciful; and, besides, her eye was attracted by the majesty of the flowing tide, which was coming in rapidly, and though the weather was calm, one giant wave rolled on, and shattered its crest with such force that mother and daughter were drenched with the spray.

"I declare it was quite spiteful," said Catherine, shaking her mantle, and drawing her mother higher up on the beach; "just as I was thinking, that wave, rising like a concave emerald, was the most glorious one I had ever seen."

"I suppose that is just the way the sea served Canute!" exclaimed little Teddy—whose element-

ary knowledge of English history was remarkably recent and ready. "Look, mamma! the next wave will fill up my dyke, and wash away all my fortifications. After all, it is stupid work digging in the sand!" And as he spoke the child threw down his wooden spade with a gesture half of weariness, half of disgust.

Mrs. Freeth picked up the little spade,—somehow she could not help noticing that the hollow which Teddy had scooped and called his dyke, looked just like a grave.

"Mamma," continued the little fellow, "you said the other day that papa was building up a great wall of mud and stone, to keep the water out of a sort of dyke. I want to know how he does it?"

"You had better ask Gilbert; he knows all about it, I dare say," replied the mother.

"I did ask him, mamma,—but he said I was too young to understand,—and he would not tell me what is to be done when I come to sand,—one cannot build anything on sand!"

Mrs. Freeth remembered Who it was that had warned us against sandy foundations; but a

certain shy reverence prevented her from "improving the occasion," or pointing the moral of her child's play.

CHAPTER XI.

LADY HARTRINGTON'S DINNER-PARTY.

But all too little welaway the while
 Lasteth such joy, ithanked be Fortune,
 That seemeth truest when she will beguile.

CHAUCER.

“**K**ATE, could I not get off going to this dinner-party? I would so much rather stay at home.”

The speaker was Mrs. Freeth, who, with her family, had returned to town a few days previously.

“I do not see how, dear mamma, you could. People do not like to be disappointed of a dinner-guest at the last moment, when there is no time to fill up the vacant place.”

"Oh, at a large party," returned the mother, "at a large party of at least twenty, which, I dare say, this of Lady Hartrington's will be, it cannot signify; and you and your papa can easily make my apologies."

"But what shall we say?" replied Catherine.

"Say! Oh, say what is the truth, that we have only just returned home from Shingle-beach, and that I am over-fatigued with unpacking and arranging domestic matters."

"I am afraid," said Catherine, with a slight shake of her head, "that papa would be greatly vexed if such an apology were offered. What a pity that you did not decline the invitation at first, since you are so disinclined to go."

"Your papa would not let me, or I should have done so."

"Then I am sure papa must wish you to keep your engagement."

"Kate, I cannot help it, though perhaps I am wrong. I am sure my not wishing to go is from no fault of Lady Hartrington's; for she has always been very civil to us. But I don't feel at ease with her, as I do with old friends; and then everything is so magnificent,—so beyond

all we have been used to, that I feel quite stupid and depressed——”

“What a pity!” sighed Catherine. “To me her house is quite exhilarating, and I cannot fancy how you can be afraid of her. She seems to me the most charming old lady in the world.”

“Ah, well, you can talk about the things Lady Hartrington is interested in. I cannot. I declare, I feel to-day that if I forced myself to go, I should very likely burst out crying when I got there;” and Mrs. Freeth lifted her handkerchief, as if the very thought brought tears.

“Dear mamma, you must be ill,” said Catherine, tenderly. “I hardly like to leave you.”

“Oh, you must go,” replied the mother, speaking eagerly; “it would vex your papa, indeed, for us both to disappoint; and, besides, I am not to say ill,—only tired and worried about a hundred things. Ah, what a happy time it was at Shinglebeach, compared with this London life! Suppose you were to make the excuse that I am staying at home to receive the

new governess. That is quite true, you know !”

“It is not a reason that would please papa. Hester is too sensible to expect such consideration, I am sure, and will most likely be tired with her journey, and glad to be perfectly quiet. At any rate, Phoebe and Jane are quite old enough to welcome her. Indeed, mamma, it would be rude to send such a message to Lady Hartrington.”

“Then, what can I say ?” sighed Mrs. Freeth, “if I must not tell the truth. Though, indeed, I have a headache, if you think that sufficient apology.”

“If you are resolved to stay at home, we must make it serve. But I wish even now that I could persuade you to exert yourself and go. Only it is high time to dress. Burton is quicker than your maid ; she would put out your things in no time, and dress you without trouble, and I could manage very well with Janet’s assistance.”

“No, no, I cannot go ; but if I did, I should not want Burton. I am content with a hum-

bler person who does a great deal more useful work. And I must say, Catherine," added Mrs. Freeth, with a just perceptible asperity, "that you are getting into dreadfully idle, helpless habits, having Burton always at your beck and call; though, as for her hair-dressing, your hair never looked so well as when you did it yourself."

"You know papa wished us to have a proper lady's-maid," exclaimed Catherine, in self-defence, "and really, one servant between three sisters is not more than is necessary."

"Necessary!" repeated Mrs. Freeth, with decided emphasis. "My dear, ask Janet Gillespie how she managed with all of you, and nothing but a servant of all work, besides."

"Mamma, things were very different then," said Catherine, meekly, "and indeed—indeed I am not idle, though I do like plenty of servants about me; and I think the great comfort of having money is that one need not waste one's time in doing any menial thing for one's self."

"Ah, well, it is of no use arguing," sighed Mrs. Freeth; but she added, "Yet, I declare, Catherine, to hear you talk quite frightens me some-

times, and where you get your notions from, I cannot think !”

With fine tact, Catherine saw that she must no longer treat her mother's present mood in a serious manner, so she tried to laugh it off, and then, hoping the headache would soon be cured, and charging Mrs. Freeth with kind messages to Hester Otway, she ran upstairs to commence dressing. Before she reached her room, her father's step was heard, and she knew he must be gone into the little back drawing-room, where he would hear his wife's excuse for staying at home.

Perhaps it was well that Catherine had to dress rather hurriedly, otherwise she might have mused more sorrowfully about her mother's indifference to so much that delighted herself. But be it remembered that Catherine was only nineteen, at the very age, and with the very temperament, to enjoy life keenly. Though an “engaged girl,” and her lover absent, she had still looked forward to this dinner-party with interest and pleasure, for Sir Jasper and Lady Hartrington were exceptional people, who drew the most delightful society

about them. She knew it was a party hurriedly made up in honour of a distinguished foreigner, and that Lady Hartrington had done her best to gather together, at short notice, and out of the season, people who would appreciate an introduction to the world-famous *savant*. She expected to meet several famous people, and was not without a sort of pride that it was her father's recognised talents which gave the *entrée* to this charmed circle.

Having an experienced maid, the dressing was expeditious; and as Catherine stood for a moment before the cheval-glass while she drew on her gloves, she could not but know she was fair. She knew, also, that her pale yet rich silk dress fell in graceful, undulating folds, that it fitted perfectly, that the camelia in her hair, with its drooping leaves, lighted up the dark mass of her plaits and braids, and that the emerald cross—Reuben's gift—which rose and fell with her breathing, gleamed as only very precious jewels do. But this knowledge kindled not one spark of vulgar vanity in her mind; it only shed about her just that quiet satisfaction which is indispensable to womanly dignity.

Nobody ever called Catherine proud or haughty, or vain or conceited ; but if you had analyzed her gifts and graces, a large amount of "dignity" would certainly have been found among them. It was a dignity like that we associate with the tall, sceptre-like lily, when we dream that, though conscious of its loveliness, it has no vanity, but holds itself erect, as if in unconscious aspiring towards those excelling sisters which bloom among the saints, and are wands in the hands of angels. It is the rose—the queen of the earthly garden—which bows her head, as if oppressed by the remembrance of her beauty, and always looks as if blushing at the praises lavished on her.

Catherine and her father met in the hall, and in two minutes were seated side by side in the brougham. She was delighted to find him in excellent spirits, and less annoyed than she had expected him to be at her mother's remaining at home.

"It is a pity, but I could not persuade her to rouse herself and come with us," he said, in answer to his daughter's remark on the subject.

Now, the truth is, Hubert Freeth's persuasions had not been very persistent. He had wished her to accept the invitation in the first instance, and certainly to avail herself of it, because he thought it right and proper that she should do so, and was conscious of the atrocity of breaking a dinner engagement. But it is necessary to admit, in searching motives and accounting for demeanour, that Hubert Freeth had ceased to desire, as ardently as he had done a few months previously, that his wife should be always his companion in society. More than once she had done and said "foolish things" which made him bite his lip from sheer vexation, and the result of subsequent marital correction had not been satisfactory, however tenderly administered. It had had the effect of making her watchful, self-conscious, almost sullen in society, and this is a condition which must lead to *gaucherie* of many sorts.

On the other hand, he was proud of his eldest daughter, with a pride that was deeply rooted, and daily nourished by her presence. Yet, perhaps, even he prized her more for her grace of manner than for those noble qualities of which

her manners were but the expression. Certain it was that he felt the most sure reliance that she was already courted, and received in "good houses," for her own sake, rather than because she was his daughter. And, I think, as she hung on his arm, entering Lady Hartrington's drawing-room, he was reconciled to the message of apology he had to deliver.

Lady Hartrington was sorry for the headache, and sorry also for the vacant place at the dinner-table, more especially since, within the hour, she had had another disappointment. Perhaps she was sorrier still when eight o'clock struck, and the last of the expected guests was still absent. However, the German baron, the lion of the party, was there, and already in animated conversation with Mr. Freeth; under the sheltering bombardment of their two sonorous voices, there was the sharp rifle practice of small talk and smart repartee throughout the room, and Catherine heard Lady Hartrington say to her husband,

"I never knew Algernon Raybrooke unpunctual before—something must have occurred; we had better ring for dinner to be served."

And Sir Jasper rang ; but, in a few minutes, the expected guest was announced—in fact, just in time for Lady Hartrington to say,

“ Mr. Raybrooke, will you take Miss Freeth ? ”

Evidently he was an intimate friend, for the host and hostess more usually called him Algeron, yet it so happened that several of the other guests were strangers to him. It was only common courtesy to pay attention to the lady he had escorted from the drawing-room, and next whom he was seated, as a matter of course.

Mrs. Freeth was right in saying there would be at least twenty guests, as there were, notwithstanding the disappointments, which had somewhat disconcerted the arrangements of the hostess. Catherine and her companion, however, found themselves placed near the centre of a long and broad table. Her father, who was on the same side, sat next to Lady Hartrington, and *vis-à-vis* to the German baron. A plateau of silver and looking-glass supported shallow vases of flowers, the glass reflecting them, as if it were a bright stream of water, but, according to the then fashion, the massive *epergne* in the centre acted like a screen at that part of the table.

The room was pleasantly, but not glaringly, lighted; the well-trained servants were quick and yet quiet; the viands and wines were excellent and *recherchés*; yet was there nothing of vulgar ostentation to provoke remark, and drag down the thoughts to the subject of gastronomy.

The conversation between Mr. Freeth and the Baron, begun in the drawing-room, was soon resumed across the dinner-table; but it did not diverge into lecturing and keep other people silent. The party, as commonly happens, broke itself into little knots, and, in more than one instance, into conversational duets.

"Were you hungry?" said Algernon Raybrooke to Catherine, after some common-place remarks had been exchanged between them.

The question was so odd that Catherine looked up with a smile, and their eyes met in a steady gaze.

"Yes—rather; but not very. Why do you ask?" And the smile almost melted into a laugh.

"Because I owe Lady Hartrington's guests an apology, if dinner was really kept waiting

for me. But I had to travel thirty miles by railway this afternoon, and the train was delayed by a slight accident. Then, at the terminus, I undertook to assist a young lady—a fellow-passenger in a little difficulty—and the two circumstances together threw me an hour out of my time.”

“It seems to me,” replied Catherine, “that your fault should be more than forgiven, since it is outweighed by a good deed.”

“Not at all; there are daily actions which it is no merit to perform, but which it would be a great demerit to neglect.”

“Ah, so I have often thought.”

“Have you? Then, perhaps,” he continued, “you will agree with me that praise and censure are generally somewhat blindly meted out.”

“That is because we cannot trace motives,” observed Catherine.

“And because we do not attempt to measure the force of circumstances.”

“It would be very easy, I think,” said Catherine, “to err on the other side; if we were always measuring the force of circum-

stances, it would be difficult to establish clear notions about the right or wrong of anything."

"That is quite true," replied Algernon; "but, I confess, I am very lenient to people who hover, as it were, for a long time between opposite opinions—more lenient still toward those who have the courage to change firmly-fixed opinions."

"You are a defender, then, of changeable people!"

And Catherine was so conscious of several changes of opinion having taken place in her own mind lately, that there was a ring of gladness in her tone, and her exclamation sounded almost like a confession that she was one of the people liable to change. Now it matters very little on a dull day where the first rent in the clouds takes place—the rent from which the murkiness sweeps away, and through which the blue sky looks serene and beautiful—in like manner, it signifies very little, indeed, by what commonplace discourse sympathetic people first find themselves mutually understood. It is a fact that these revelations do take place and often

ly and simultaneously, and yet with the irresistible conviction of truth.

I cannot tell what Algernon Raybrooke and Catherine Freeth talked of during the two hours they sat side by side—though not of friends and acquaintances certainly; probably the range was wide, high, and broad, as the blue sky looks when the clouds drop away like a tent that is struck. Indeed, they seemed lapped and wrapped in some ethereal atmosphere which had mystic influences about it. Yet, withal, they felt a great calm. Algernon Raybrooke bore a fair share in the general conversation of the table, and his manner had not a particle of the vulgar fussiness of commonplace men when they are struck with a pretty face and seek to play the agreeable. There was no flirtation, no *persiflage*; and when at last the ladies rose, nothing had indicated to lookers-on that Algernon Raybrooke had, within those two hours, recognised the woman who was to influence his life!

Catherine was the only "girl" of the party—which, indeed, included more gentlemen than ladies—and, perhaps, it was natural that she

should suffer the married ladies to keep up the ball of conversation during the post-prandial half-hour in the drawing-room. Moreover, she seemed attracted by some fine engravings scattered about a table, in one corner of the room ; and she seated herself near it to examine them. Lady Hartrington drew her attention to some of Retzsch's outlines, which were new to Catherine, who was, however, quick in recognising their power and grandeur. Like all students of German, she had read "Faust ;" but it is not a work that is milk for babes, or one that is often in the least appreciated by youthful readers. As yet, Catherine infinitely preferred Schiller to Goethe. Yet these pictorial revelations of the wondrous drama recalled it to her mind, and impressed her very sensibly. She began to recognise the humanity of Faust, and the pure womanhood of Margaret, as they were here interpreted. She turned the leaves slowly, drinking in the poet's meaning, by the artist's help, in a manner she had not done unassisted. And then, when the other pictures had been examined, she came upon that mystical creation, the "Chess-Players," in which humanity is

matched against the Evil One, a soul being the stake.

Wonderfully impressive is this pencilled parable, especially in moods of trial and temptation, and of strong human emotion. The virtues, taken piece by piece, the exultant countenance of the fiend, and the shadowy form of the sorrowing guardian angel, have a strange pathos, fit to wring the half-repentant heart. It was this picture which lay in Catherine's lap, as she leaned forward in her low chair, when the gentlemen returned to the drawing-room. She felt, rather than saw, that as Algernon Raybrooke passed the doorway his eyes sought her; but she did not lift her head. Nor did he at first advance to the side of the room where she was seated. Coffee-cup in hand, he stood chatting for several minutes with their hostess.

Presently, however, he drew a light chair beside Catherine, and seating himself in it, began talking of the engraving in her hand.

"Ah! we have all that game to play," he exclaimed, "yet I think that to man there is sometimes given a wingless and visible guardian angel."

A great paleness came over Catherine's face, but was rapidly succeeded by a suffusing blush. Yet she answered his remark promptly, saying:

"But there are evil angels as well as good; how are we to distinguish?"

"Not by reasoning, not by teaching, but by intuitive knowledge."

As he spoke, his heart leaped with a fulness of ecstasy, for he had seen the pallor, and noticed the blush, and they were to him like heralds of joy.

And now other guests drew near the little table, and the conversation grew general. It was becoming that, in the presence of the German *savant*, the literature and art of his nation should be appreciatingly discussed, and very natural that an amateur pianist, of refined taste, should select Beethoven and Mendelssohn to interpret. It was Algernon who opened the piano, and asked for the "Wedding March," but he stood behind Catherine's chair while it was played. Some other guest besought the player not to rise, and the lady passed to the opera of "Fidelio." It was while she was playing, with unaffected pathos, some variations on the

Chorus of Prisoners, that Mr. Freeth's carriage was announced, and soon afterwards the party broke up.

Algernon contrived his leave-taking so as to be in the hall, in readiness to hand Catherine into the brougham, and then he jumped into a hansom cab which was loitering near. A hansom cab rattled along the street two minutes after Catherine and her father had alighted at their own door.

CHAPTER XII.

AT THE MIDNIGHT HOUR.

Ce sont les caractères passionnés, bien plus que les caractères légers, qui sont capable de folie.

CORINNE.

IT was not what Londoners call late ; nevertheless the family at Telford House had all retired, except the man who opened the door, and Burton, who had insisted on sitting up for her young mistress.

“ But I told you to go to bed,” said Catherine, as the maid, candlestick in hand, met her on the stairs. “ Indeed, I can manage very well for myself. There, that will do,” she continued, when they had reached her room, and Burton had laid aside Catherine’s cloak, and removed

two or three pins, "indeed, that will do ; I would rather not keep you up."

The words, the voice, the manner were as kind as ever, but yet there was something in Catherine's tones which compelled prompt obedience ; and Burton, after stirring the fire, and replacing the guard, curtsied "good-night."

The room was brilliantly light, but more from the blazing fire than from candles on the toilet ; and as Catherine turned from dropping the night-bolt, she could not help seeing, for the second time that evening, her whole figure reflected in the cheval-glass. It seemed to her that an age had passed since she had glanced at herself before dinner, and yet, in reality, not five hours had elapsed.

She might be conscious that a breath of change had passed over her countenance, but her eyes drooped, and refused to examine anything. Only did she remark that the emerald cross shone with a sort of fierce lustre, and hurriedly, and with trembling fingers, she tried to unclasp the chain by which it was suspended. In her agitation she did not easily find the snap, and

when, at last the jewel was removed, she dropped it hastily into a drawer—almost as if it burned her hand—instead of laying it in its case. It happened that the clasp of her warm cloak had pressed heavily on the cross, really hurting her, had she been in a mood sensitive to physical pain, and the ornament left on her skin, for some little time, a red tracery of its shape—and this she saw as she stood at her toilet-table.

In a more leisurely manner she unfastened the bracelets from her arms, and mechanically placed them in their cases. The bracelets were recent gifts from her father. Then she stripped some rings from her fingers, still in the same automatic manner; but, from the habit of many months, one ring, a diamond, set transparently, was left for awhile undisturbed. Suddenly she became conscious of the flashing jewel and tried to remove it; but the ring resisted all her efforts. Had she grown stouter?—or was her hand fevered to-night and swollen? She could not tell; she only knew that the more impatient her endeavour to draw off the ring, the more that endeavour failed. After awhile she

plunged her hand into cold water, and renewed her efforts with a sort of desperation, but no artifice succeeded. The jewel in the heavy setting, which she could neither break nor bend, seemed, to her excited fancy, to flash defiance at her, like some living snake-like thing which tightened round her finger with more and more constricted folds.

At last, as if with a spasm of anguish, she burst into tears, and drooped her face in her hands; and this, though Catherine was not by temperament a weeping woman. It is true her eyes could moisten readily with enthusiastic sympathy at noble deeds or tales of heroism, but such tears are like dewdrops that sparkle in the sunshine which exhales them. When she wept from any personal emotion, it was because some deep fountain was broken up; and never yet in her short life had she wept as she was weeping now.

When the passionate fit was over, she felt relieved by it—in the same way that we feel relieved when sharp pain is mitigated, and seems melted into sheer weariness and exhaustion. Amid her weeping, Catherine had plunged her

hands in her hair, and the combs were loosened, so that her long, thick tresses fell upon her shoulders, and hung before her eyes. There seemed a sort of comfort to her in the shelter of this natural veil, and for awhile she let it rest in unheeded disarray.

Indeed, she never knew how long she sat silent and motionless. The dying fire crackled in the grate, and the candles had already sunk in their sockets, when she roused herself, by an effort, and began gathering up her hair and preparing for rest. Through the Venetian blinds she now perceived that it was moonlight, and, by that instinct which impels us in moments of anguish or desolation to appeal to nature, she lifted one of the blinds aside, and peered out from her dark room into the bright night. For the night was bright, though it was only a waning, gibbous moon that had climbed the sky, and was shedding a feeble, ghostly light through the frosty ether. But myriads of stars flecked the blue arch, and the silvery galaxy looked like a stairway of heaven. Yet this glory of the night, such as many a time had afforded her a rapture of delight, seemed now

almost cruel in its chill, far-off glitter ; the moon looked misshapen and sickly, as if weary of beaming upon a world of woe ; and the twinkling stars seemed pitiless in their shining unrest.

Everyone knows how deep the shadows are on such a night as that I am describing—thus, as Catherine's eyes drooped earthward from their star-gazing, she did not at first observe that there was a living creature in sight. But London gaslights throw their beams far and wide, and, in a moment or two, a figure shaped itself in the gloom ; but a figure that remained motionless as a carved effigy. Against a piece of wall on the other side of the road a tall man was leaning, with his arms folded across his chest, and his head slightly upturned, in the direction of the very window from which Catherine looked.

A sort of fascination now came over her—a spell which made her still hold back the blind, and resolutely gaze, as if, by force of will, her vision must ascertain for fact that which her bounding heart told her was the truth. Yes, she was not mistaken ; and posi-

tively a smile curled her lip at the thought of doubt, as if there were something richly ridiculous in the idea that, under any possible circumstances, she could blunder where *that* identity was in question. Yes, it was Algernon Raybrooke who had been watching while she had wept. True lover, she said, with the strange, strong love—not yet twelve hours old—which had lifted them both up as if by the force of a whirlwind!

Gently now she let the blind fall back; a great calm came over her soul, and she sought her pillow, feeling suddenly sensible of bodily fatigue. The truth was, the great strain, the great wrestle, of conflicting principles closed when she recognized Algernon's presence. To her own soul she now asserted that to Reuben Appersley she belonged no more; and though his ring touched her cheek, as at last she sank to slumber, it seemed no longer to sting her by its grasp. She thought she prayed—vaguely, incoherently, inarticulately, she knew—for guidance, strength, and help to carry her forward across the broad gulf which she had already determined to pass.

It may be that unseen hosts look with angelic pity on every soul that thinks itself "determined" on any course of action, and with deeper compassion still on prayers so heavily laden with earthly desires that they cannot be carried heavenward !

CHAPTER XIII.

THE NEXT DAY.

Dreams are true while they last, and do we not live in
dreams? TENNYSON.

Quand on souffre, on se persuade aisément que l'on est
coupable, et les violents chagrins portent le trouble jusque
dans la conscience.

CORINNE.

THE breakfast-hour next morning came burdened with several petty trials to Mrs. Freeth. This pattern housewife and methodical manager was ever intolerant of late rising or matutinal unpunctuality, and was half angry at Burton entering the parlour with a request for a cup of tea and slice of toast, which Miss Freeth would take in her room, instead of keeping the breakfast on the table. Nor was

Catherine the only delinquent. Instead of being up at least as early as her pupils, and giving them the completest benefit of her society, Hester Otway, the governess, did not even present herself when the breakfast-bell rang at nine o'clock precisely. Indeed, the coffee was cool, and the tea diluted, before she entered the room, with no better excuse for her want of punctuality than that she had forgotten to wind up her watch, and had mistaken the striking of a clock.

Mr. Freeth, who was just finishing his meal, greeted her very kindly, and with that instinctive courtesy which might help to make her feel that she was respected. As he did so, he could not help silently remarking that either Hester Otway was ill, or that she was dreadfully fallen off since he last saw her, some two or three years ago. Mrs. Freeth also observed that Hester's cheeks were pale and her eyes heavy, but with the mental comment that Miss Otway had reached the age when women look their best by candle-light. Certainly, after all the fatigues of a long journey, the governess had looked fresher, brighter, gayer, the pre-

ceding evening, as she seemed heartily to enjoy the "tea-dinner" prepared for her, than she did now. Moreover, she had but a slight appetite for breakfast, though she would not confess to illness.

"I wonder," observed Mrs. Freeth, after a few commonplace remarks—"I wonder Catherine should be so lazy this morning. I thought she would be all eagerness to make amends for her absence last night, and to welcome her old acquaintance. For indeed, Miss Otway, she has looked forward to your coming to us with the greatest pleasure."

It would seem as if the governess tried to make some civil rejoinder, but that the words died on her tongue. Yet she smiled with a sickly smile, that showed the edges of her white teeth, but had no gladness in it; and then, as something seemed expected from her, she said:

"Miss Freeth is very good, I am sure; but it would have been a pity for her to have hurried down, or to have considered me as a visitor. Besides, she may be tired this morning."

The little speech was commonplace enough,

yet it made Mrs. Freeth comprehend that Hester had accepted her position, and was not likely to presume upon past intimacy. Even the two young girls, Phoebe and Jane, looked up with a sort of shy surprise, thinking how much graver and colder their governess seemed this morning. Last night she had been cheerful and quite amusing, as she described some incidents of country life, till—as Jane now remembered—she had suddenly grown more silent, and begged to retire. It was just after their mother had told Miss Otway, as a piece of pleasant news, that Catherine was going to marry her cousin Reuben.

Breakfast had long been finished when Catherine made her appearance, and really she looked so well, and with her natural radiance so perceptibly heightened, that Mrs Freeth could not refrain from uttering something like a scolding for her late rising. But the scolding did not seem to hurt her very much this morning, and she only exclaimed :

“I am sorry, dear mamma, if you are vexed ; I really have no excuse but idleness.”

Meanwhile she had approached Hester with

outstretched hands, and offered for a loving kiss the cheek which was flushed, as everybody imagined, with pleasure at the meeting ; a meeting, however, which she had been a little tardy in bringing about.

Suddenly Hester was melted—even more than the occasion seemed to require—and, though her lips were cold and trembling, she returned Catherine's kiss with an impulsive fervor, and tears swam in her eyes as Catherine uttered some happy phrase of kindly greeting. Yet, glad as the two girls appeared to be at meeting, conversation somehow flagged, and nobody demurred when Hester proposed adjourning to the school-room with her pupils.

" *Plus de richesses, plus de soins,*" is a proverb that poor people are never very ready to believe in ; but a good many mistresses, though not all, will declare that the more servants they command, the more domestic anxieties they endure. Certainly Mrs. Freeth had grown to be of this opinion, and still found for herself, in verifying accounts and ordinary domestic affairs, very nearly as much occupation as of old. Thus it chanced that she and her eldest

daughter did not meet again until luncheon-time.

Meanwhile, Catherine had the drawing-room all to herself, and by one of those artifices to which even frank-natured people, under a supreme temptation, have been known, half-unconsciously, to resort, she unlocked her paint-box, and set her drawing-materials in order before her, and had the household been required to give evidence of her occupation that morning, the footman would have declared that, when he entered the room to make up the fire, Miss Freeth was diligently painting.

But few, indeed, were the traces of her pencil the cardboard bore! It was her heart that, conscious of being stirred to its depths, was drawing out a chart, and colouring it in the brilliant hues which fancy is ever ready to lend to the youthful dreamer. And, as she leaned back in her chair, gazing on the inanimate pieces of furniture, which were magnetized through her eyes from her thoughts, and ever after retained a reminding principle of association, a panoramic procession of events passed before her.

To the vision of all true lovers, lions in the way lie down with the gentleness of lambs; mountains of difficulty take the proportions of mole-hills; yawning gulfs close up, or are bridged over by a miracle; rough roads are made smooth; hard things made easy; and "difficult," as well as "impossible," is only a dictionary word made to be laughed at. Lifted into an empyrean inaccessible to mortals in their ordinary condition, the soul has expanded to meet the requirements of the rarefied atmosphere in which it has now to breathe; and it scorns the lessons of the plain, and dreams there are no stumbling-blocks on the heights to which it has reached. And very often it is right; the lions and the mountains and the yawning gulfs are by no means difficulties to be dreaded.

Thus, as Catherine mused, and yielded to the wave of her emotions, the fact of her engagement to her cousin Reuben seemed not the strong and hideous fetter which it really was. Only one truth was there which, perhaps, she saw in its white clearness, untinted by the play of passions. The truth that it would be a bit-

terer wrong to wed him, under present circumstances, than to break with him in the rudest, roughest manner. But she would not break with him rudely or unkindly, but with the sweetest, tenderest sisterly affection. For, indeed, she loved him, much as she would have loved him had he been her brother. Doubtless he had made a mistake equal to her own, and she only wished that he would discover it at once by falling fathoms deep in love with some one else. Should they both live to be old, how perhaps they would smile at the early folly which had mistaken a mere cousinly regard, the natural consequence of youthful association, for the heart's master-passion. Why, it was like mistaking a Northern twilight for noon in the South.

Yet, even as she makes to herself the comparison, she remembers how soft and sweet a thing that Northern twilight is, and how swiftly, in brighter lands, black night comes up and chases back the shining day. Suppose this firm assurance that she also is beloved, should only be the figment of a dream! Why, still, no matter, she must not marry Cousin Reuben, but let her life be constant to an idea,

and satisfied with a memory. In the fervour of the moment, Catherine believed herself capable of calmly realizing this alternative; nay, even of finding in it something compensating and heroic. Yet, all the while, as if toning the picture of her possible fate, there reigned the sure conviction that at this very hour Algernon Raybrooke was likewise in reverie, and planning how, before the day was dead, they might meet again!

Luncheon-time—which was dinner-time for the governess and younger children—and Mrs. Freeth *loquitur*.

“Catherine, papa thinks as my headache is gone, I ought to call on Lady Hartrington to-day. Would you like to go with me?”

“Dear mamma,” replied Catherine, with an eagerness of manner that did not pass unnoticed, “I would much rather stay at home this afternoon than pay visits or shop. Besides, I have hardly spoken to Miss Otway yet, and she will be at leisure by and by.”

“Oh, but I thought, if you did not go, I might take Miss Otway and Phoebe and Jane as far as

Kensington Gardens, and set them down to have a walk while I went further."

"Then for that very reason I will not go—that there may be room for them," replied Catherine, trying, however, to speak as if her decision, after all, were of little importance. And yet she felt that she could not—that for worlds she would not call that day at the house where she had met Algernoon Raybrooke, and where nothing was more likely than that, at the same hour, he might himself be paying a visit of politeness. Whatever might or must happen, her girlish instinct taught her not to advance a step towards his presence.

The luncheon passed away rather more cheerfully than the breakfast-time had done. Though Hester Otway still looked pale, and had by no means recovered the good spirits of the preceding evening, there was nothing in her manner strongly to arrest the attention of her old acquaintances. Indeed, Mrs. Freeth attributed a certain gravity of mien which was certainly perceptible in Hester to her "governess" position, and, if the truth must be told, liked her all the

better for it. The mother had latterly felt herself conscious of a keen sympathy with those unfortunate fowls who are set to hatch ducklings, and suffer the extreme possible of hen-agony when they see their offspring take to the water. Mrs. Freeth was perpetually finding her children ready to do deeds and dare depths at which she shuddered, and, therefore, she contemplated with satisfaction a grave task-mistress, who, no doubt, was both willing and able to maintain authority.

It was bright but chilly October weather, and Mrs. Freeth proposed that they should start between two and three o'clock, or the beauty of the day "would be over before the pedestrians could reach the gardens. Accordingly, Hester and her pupils were ready when the brougham drove up, and, as it rattled away from the door, Catherine was once more left to her own meditations and resources. I think she was woman enough to smoothe her hair, and see that the fair white collar, which encircled her throat, was without crease or blemish before she settled herself with books and embroidery to be "at home,"

and receive any chance visitors who might call that afternoon.

And of course that fine day there were a few callers, though it was the dead season, and nobody was supposed to be in London. And one visitor in Mrs. Freeth's absence merely left cards, and others were ushered into the daughter's presence, and they talked the usual morning visitors' talk, and by it distracted Catherine's mind, momentarily, from the idea which coloured all her thoughts.

But when the last of these callers had departed, and the clock on the mantelpiece had chimed five o'clock, a death-like pallor stole over her countenance, and lines were marked there as by the touch of some cruel disappointment! Yet she leaned back in her chair, and, with tightly clasped hands, but closed eyes, strove to recover her ebbing composure—and not wholly without success. When again she looked at the dial, the twilight had so deepened that she could scarcely distinguish the slender hands that pointed to the figures, and the next minute there was the sound of a car-

riage drawing to the door. Hardly had Catherine stirred the fire, so as somewhat to illuminate the room, when her mother and sisters entered.

CHAPTER XIV.

NO ONE TO BLAME.

He knew
That the night had divided his whole life in two,
Behind him a past that was over for ever,
OWEN MEREDITH.

AS it has been hinted, the gravity of Hester Otway was pleasing to Mrs. Freeth, was considered by her appropriate to the "governess" character, and an earnest of those administrative qualities on which she was so ready to rely. And as Mrs. Freeth was thoroughly kind-hearted, as far as her sympathies were awakened, she did, in the drive from Westminster to Bayswater, make herself very agreeable. She showed consideration in seve-

ral of the little arrangements she proposed, and set a very good example of due respect for the teacher, to the two young girls, who sat *vis-à-vis*.

"I shall be able to take you up again in less than an hour," said Mrs. Freeth, as the brougham stopped at Queen's Gate; "and then we shall still have time to drive down Regent Street, and do a little shopping before returning home. Or can I take you anywhere that you wish to go?"

"No, thank you," said Hester, "not to-day. There is no hurry about my little purchases—perhaps some time next week I may beg to be excused for a few hours, to see an old friend, and also arrange my Winter wardrobe."

"Oh, whenever you like; you shall have the brougham any day, if you only mention your wish over-night; pray—pray, my dear Miss Otway, make yourself quite at home, in all respects, with us." And Mrs. Freeth pressed Hester's hand, kindly, as she spoke, and the pressure was not only warmly returned, but Hester's eyes were moistened when she tried

to give a smiling nod as the carriage drove off.

And then the governess—led by her pupils to the pleasantest paths—strove hard to find cheerful, wholesome conversation with which to beguile the time, Phoebe and Jane being nothing loth to bear their share in the discourse. For, though the girls were conscious of that undercurrent of gravity which had so satisfied their mother, their fresh instincts recognized in it a something sad, rather than stern, and their ready prattle and frequent questions were no way silenced by it.

But while their young voices rang with a sort of treble tone in Hester's ears, there was a sigh in the Autumn wind, as it whirled the dead leaves in showers from the trees, that seemed like a rich, harmonious bass! Often in our lives there are noiseless events which mature character, even in a few hours—and Hester Otway felt as if years older than she had been the day before. Older in the sense of having lived a real appreciable piece of her life in that short time. And, oh, the incredible value of those small kindnesses which cost so little, and

yet are so often withheld ! Those few kind words from Mrs. Freeth had been a strength and a solace to the poor dependent in an hour of unsuspected trial ; and, as the girls prattled, and the wind soughed, she lifted a prayer that she might see her duty, and do it, whatever else might betide.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Freeth proceeded to call on Lady Hartrington, whose residence was one of the few fine old houses in the Tyburnian district. Lady Hartrington was well—nay, what heralds would call high—born, seeing that she claimed cousinship with half the peerage ; and yet she was not what is understood by a woman of fashion. True it is, she was nearly sixty years old, and so beyond the age which milliners seek for lay-figures and living advertisements ; nevertheless, so subtle an influence did she exert in a wide and ever extending circle, that the tone of her drawing-room was felt to have weight in graver matters than the depth of a flounce or the shade of a ribbon.

Earlier in life her husband—now quite an old man—had filled various diplomatic positions,

and so it had come to pass that she had dwelt in foreign capitals, and mixed freely with their denizens. Rather *petite* in person, there was not in her voice or manner one masculine trait; yet was she a good linguist, a fine musician, a subtle art-critic, and, what is a great-deal rarer in a woman, a keen, shrewd politician.

The clever men who were the *habitués* of her *salon*—attracted thither at first they hardly knew how or why—had found out her gifts and graces only by degrees. The little grey-haired old lady, shrouded in rich cashmeres, or draped in velvet and the softest laces, had seemed, somehow, to develop into the beneficent godmother of fairy tales. So that, in the end, a sort of fabulous power was attributed to her, and especially the men, young enough to have been her sons, thought nothing improbable which she wished, and nothing impossible that she attempted to bring about.

In reality, her fairy gift was a shrewd, keen appreciation of individual character, allied to a deep and warm sympathy with baffled hopes and noble aspirations, with silent endurance, and all those earnest endeavours which make

up so much of the unsung poetry of human life.

She was an old friend of Hubert Freeth's, and had been pleased in these latter days to become acquainted with his family. Catherine was already one of her "pets;" and in Lionel she was interested, looking upon him as a youth worth questioning and considering, and almost did she venture to prophesy his future, weighting her bright predictions with the fewest possible "ifs" and "buts." Though their mother was, in many respects, the very opposite of herself, yet she liked Mrs. Freeth a great deal better than she did many more brilliant women. She saw into the clear depths of her unselfish and sincere nature, and though Mrs. Freeth's experience and resources were evidently narrow and bounded, there was something refreshing about her character when contrasted with the commoner type of sordid, restless people.

Lady Hartrington could not be wholly unconscious of the influence she possessed over many of her acquaintances, and it seems within probability that in this, the early stage of their intercourse, she desired, from pure good nature,

by word and by deed, not only to set Mrs. Freeth at her ease, but to stamp her with consideration in the eyes of others, and confer all those nameless benefits which a beneficent queen of society so well knows how to lavish.

Therefore, when the door of her drawing-room—already tenanted by three other guests—was thrown open and Mrs. Freeth was announced, Lady Hartrington advanced to greet her with more than ordinary cordiality. Then, leading her to a lounge-chair next her own—a seat just vacated by a gentleman who had enjoyed that post of honour—she made kind inquiries after her health, and lamented her absence the preceding day.

Now, the inner drawing-room, or morning-room, in which Lady Hartrington was accustomed to receive morning visitors, was a spot very characteristic of herself. It was her habit, Summer and Winter, to occupy a *fauteuil* at the right-hand side of the fire-place. During the very few months, or even weeks, of an English Summer, in which she considered it warm enough to dispense with a fire, the grate was always hidden by flowering inodorous plants ; but this

October day a bright fire, lately replenished with a log of wood, shone and crackled, and shed an air of cheerfulness throughout the room.

Books and pictures so nearly covered the walls that it was hardly worth while to notice that the paper was of a minute pattern in creamy white and gold. There was a looking-glass high above the chimney-piece, and a few little glimpses of mirror in other parts of the room ; but not too much—not enough to dazzle with its glitter, or distort and confuse objects. A noble bust in marble of Sir Jasper, taken in his prime, stood on a pedestal in a recess, and several exquisite statuettes, copies from the antique, were arranged on brackets. There was not an ornament in the room that looked as if it could have been spared, from the foot high Arcadian shepherd and shepherdess, in old Dresden china—who seemed to keep guard over a quaintly-decorated old clock—to the little chalcedony vases, that few but *virtuosi* discovered, on a side-table.

The clock had been given to Sir Jasper, in acknowledgment of a signal service, by a

French nobleman of the old *régime*, turned Bonapartist, and was declared to have belonged to Marie Antoinette. Nay, there was its pedigree, duly signed by hands long mouldering in the grave, and always kept behind the clock under the glass case. True it was that the works had often been "repaired" and "restored," and there were infidels who more than doubted whether the metallic ring of its strike was precisely that which, to the hapless queen, had chimed away the days which led to a scaffold.

But Lady Hartrington always put her hands to her ears, and refused to listen to such suggestions. The stern Old Time that stood at the foot of the clock, and lifted his scythe, and turned his glass as each hour struck, seemed to say: "At least, she gazed on me; and still I mow the generations down."

Indeed, there was an interesting history about countless objects in the room; and, as Lady Hartrington sat in her own special seat, with her little table beside her, she seemed fitly the presiding spirit of the place, who could talk as readily of the long-ago as of the busy, vivid yesterday. Always upon the little table was a

vase of fresh flowers—emblem, I think, of something perennial about their owner; nearly always was there a new book, with paper-knife between the leaves, a scent and salts-bottle, writing materials, and, whatever the season, a large Spanish fan.

The gentleman who had vacated the pleasant seat for Mrs. Freeth's accommodation was Algernon Raybooke, who had caught the announcement of her name, and by a look claimed from Lady Hartrington the favour of an introduction. And yet, when this was granted, he did little to improve the acquaintance, but dangled his hat and gloves in a manner unusual with him, making essentially commonplace remarks, and leaving to Lady Hartrington the part of leading the conversation.

Once or twice he flushed like a girl, and had not the courage to utter the little speech which, somehow or other, must be made. "If her mother had not thus come in my way," thought he to himself, "I might have carried out my first intention, and called without invitation. But now I must ask permission. Well, I will see her downstairs when she takes leave, and

make my request at her carriage door. It is having betrayed my secret to Lady Hartrington, I suppose, which so confuses me."

After a little while, he moved across the room, and, like an *habitué* of the house as he was, entered into conversation with the other guests, leaving Lady Hartrington and Mrs. Freeth to enjoy a *sotto voce* chat. It was enough for him to have heard that Catherine was well and at home this afternoon; he did not even attempt double listening—always an unsatisfactory proceeding—to glean any shreds of the two ladies' discourse.

Mrs. Freeth did not strive to talk fluently of art, literature, or politics, but Lady Hartrington's friendly, unaffected manner drew her into confidence, and encouraged her to speak, without restraint, of her family, and especially of her girls.

"Envy," said Lady Hartrington, with a smile, and falling into a tone of badinage not uncommon with her—"envy is, I am afraid, a quality deeply ingrained in the female heart. At any rate, I am afraid I always envy the mother of good and beautiful daughters. Except when

the time comes that I have to pity her."

"How so?" asked Mrs. Freeth. "I don't quite understand."

"Oh, the position is so autocratic; her daughters' adorers are, of course, her slaves, and, I think, we women always use power so wisely that every accession to our domestic authority is a palpable advantage to the community."

"But when is it that you pity us mothers?" answered Mrs. Freeth, gaily, and wondering how she could ever have been afraid of a woman who chatted away thus merrily.

"I pity her," said Lady Hartington, and now her tone was really earnest—"I pity her when the supreme inevitable hour arrives, when some stranger, of only the other day, becomes, perhaps quite suddenly the nearest, and dearest,—not supplanting the love towards parents, it is true, but lighting up a warmer love nearer to the heart's core. I have always thought a mother must be superhuman not to feel some sting of jealousy when this time comes—though, after all, she feels the pang, I believe, yet more acutely when a son falls deeply in love."

"Yes," replied Mrs. Freeth, after a moment's

thought; "yes, I can fancy I shall confess to something of this jealousy when the time comes for my boys to marry,—but I cannot say I have felt it with Kate's engagement. To be sure, her cousin was no 'stranger of the other day,' such as your ladyship suggests, and that may make a difference."

"Is Miss Freeth engaged?" asked Lady Hartrington, in a tone of surprise; and she added, "I am afraid you must have thought me flippant."

"Not at all, for there is much truth, Lady Hartrington, in what you say. But I thought Kate's engagement was generally known. However, our acquaintances must often forget these things, especially as Mr. Appersley is so seldom in town; and I can readily understand that the circumstance had not reached your ears."

"To a cousin, I think you said?"

"Yes, a son of Mr. Freeth's sister. The only drawback I can see to the marriage is the separation which will ensue; for Mr. Appersley is so much attached to country pursuits that we shall never persuade him to be much in London."

"Of course I must offer my congratulations," said Lady Hartrington, but, if truth must be told,

in not quite a congratulatory tone, "indeed, she has my best wishes ; but we shall miss her sadly, she is such an ornament to society. I think I shall get up a little quarrel with this cousin, on my own account, whenever I have the opportunity, and reproach him for taking away such a belle. And I suppose the wedding will be soon?"

"Not till after Christmas," returned the mother.

"Well, we must make the most of your daughter while she is among us. But I suppose I have your authority—out of charity to the single men—to announce that she is engaged?"

"Oh, certainly ; I should be quite sorry if any one who admired her fancied her free. But I don't think anything of the sort has happened—she is not at all a flirt, and would never encourage attentions merely to gratify her vanity."

"I am certain of that," replied Lady Hartrington warmly, "still men do sometimes indulge in vain hopes. And, in such cases, I always think it kindest to check them at once. I mean, when an engagement is positive and conclusive, as this appears to be."

"Oh, of course; it is the right thing to do in such a case."

And now the conversation glided to general topics, and the other guests joined in the discourse. Soon the two strangers departed, fresh visitors were announced, and then Mrs. Freeth rose to take leave.

As she placed her husband's card on the little table already described, Algernon Raybrooke moved to the door in readiness to carry out his intention of seeing Mrs. Freeth to her carriage; but, as he did so, he caught the eye of their hostess, and read on her face a grave expression which startled him. The next instant, Lady Hartington lightly touched his arm, and said, softly—

"No! Wait."

Bewildered—almost frightened, he knew not why, he instinctively obeyed, and sank into the chair he had vacated on Mrs. Freeth's entrance. But, impatient as a child who wants a puzzling riddle answered, he thought the fresh visitors who absorbed his old friend's attention inexpressibly tedious, and pined for their leave-taking in a manner which taxed his good breed-

ing to conceal. At last, the happy moment arrived, and just as the October daylight perceptibly waned, and made the glowing embers shine out the more brightly by contrast, he found himself again *tête-à-tête* with Lady Hartrington, just as he had been at the commencement of his now so protracted visit.

"Dear Lady Hartrington," he exclaimed, "what malice is it in your heart that forbade my going? Now, it is too late to call, and how am I to live till to-morrow? And the poor flowers, which were to have been my excuse for a visit, will have to wither on my own table."

"Algernon," replied the lady, and she spoke with very tender gravity, "Algernon, my poor boy—she is engaged! Have I not done wisely to keep you away?"

The young man started, and clutched the arm of the chair, while a low, half suppressed cry escaped him,—a cry almost like the moan of a creature suffering physical pain.

"Bear it like a man," continued Lady Hartrington, rising and resting her hand on his shoulder with a motherly gesture; "bear it like the brave-hearted gentleman that you are."

"O God! I never thought of this," moaned Algernon, drooping his head between his hands.

"Hush! Yet surely it was a thing we might have conjectured."

"Might we? I think not."

"Why, Algernon, do you think it so little likely that others should have admired her?"

"No!" he cried, with something of bitter irony; "last night I felt she must have had admirers by the dozen; but the thought did not trouble me, for she bore not one of the signs of an affianced girl, or of a girl who had even cherished day-dreams of a lover. She had no right to look so calm of heart and fresh in feeling. Mad fool that I was! Yet it is madder of me now to take refuge in abusing her!" And, amid the conflict of contending feelings, Algernon burst into tears.

"Bear this trouble like a man," again pleaded his friend.

"Like a man! I feel it as a man, and, therefore, cannot bear it like anything else. But," added Raybrooke, after a moment's pause, "pardon me, my kind friend, for thus distressing

you. It was good and wise of you to tell me the truth without preamble."

"I know what most people would say by way of comfort and consolation."

"What would they say?"

"That this love, so lately and so quickly born, may surely be smothered as speedily."

"But, Lady Hartrington, you do not from your own heart say this?"

"How can I, when not three hours ago you told me you had met your destiny, and that she or no other must be your wife. Besides, I am not one to ridicule love at first sight. My heart aches for you, believe me."

"Three hours ago, I had no thought of the bitter alternative, but spoke it heedlessly, as the Fates make us prophesy, and then fulfil for us hereafter. My faith in her freedom was so strong, I would have sworn she was that other half of my soul it had missed and yearned for. I had no misgivings—not that I expected to win her at a word; but I thought that I should teach her to love me, and show her we belonged to each other."

"At least there has been no fault—there is

nothing with which you can reproach yourself. The meeting, yesterday, was a pure misfortune."

"No, not that," exclaimed Raybrooke, "not that. I would not be without the memory of last evening, even if I could. Those hours seem the reality of my life, and this revelation an ugly dream. But does she," he continued, "does she love this man to whom she is betrothed? And yet it is an insult to doubt it."

"Her cousin!" replied Lady Hartrington. "He is her cousin; and, doubtless, the attachment has grown with their growth."

"Ah!" moaned Raybrooke, as the feeble flicker of that sudden hope died quite out, and the thick darkness of his disappointment gathered round his heart.

"Stay and dine with us to-day," said his kind old friend. "You must dine somewhere, and we are quite alone."

But Raybrooke shook his head, as he exclaimed:

"Dine! Must I dine somewhere? But not here, indeed; not here, my kindest friend. I

will go ; let me go now, and may God bless you for your sympathy !”

As he took leave, he raised Lady Hartrington’s small, thin hand to his lips, saying : “There is no friend like a woman at such a crisis.”

The twilight had deepened in that curtained room too much for him to see that the tears were in her eyes.

I think Lady Hartrington would have given her Marie Antoinette clock—which just then struck five—ay, and her Dresden china into the bargain, for the last twenty-four hours to have been rolled back, if her fateful dinner-party of the preceding day could, by any expedient, have been prevented.

CHAPTER XV.

A SILENT WRESTLE

I am left,
 Standing beneath the self-same heaven, to weigh
 What life has given with what it has bereft,
 And turn the even scale as best I may ;
 Some knowledge grows above my hope's decay,
 And the rank growth which once obscured the spot
 Has nourished one small flower.

FREDERICK NAPIER BROOME.

ALGERNON RAYBROOKE stepped into the first cab he could find, and was driven rapidly to his bachelor lodgings in Bury Street, St. James. He found his groom, whom he had ordered to be there at three o'clock, still waiting, though hardly thinking that Sultan, the beautiful bay, which his master had not seen for

three months, would be required that day. "Of course not,—it was now much too late to ride," and the man hurried back to the stables, wondering what could have made Mr. Raybrooke so changeable, and so sharp in his speech and manner.

Algernon ascended to his little drawing-room, with a step less light than usual, and the first thing that greeted him was the choice bouquet, which, even in chilly October, a golden coin had been able to command. It had arrived according to order. Not that he had intended to pass through London streets with such a tell-tale offering in his hand,—he would have sent it forward by a trusty messenger, and received it at the door of Telford House, making it the graceful apology for his call.

There it lay on a side-table, freshly beautiful, and pervading the small room with its delicate odour. He flung down his hat, and threw himself into an easy chair, but the sweet aroma still stole upon his senses, as if to intensify his recollections. Once he took up the flowers, intending to hurl them into the street; but they looked so innocent, looked so much as if they would

indeed have been a meet offering to *her*, that he spared them as yet, and laid them down again with gentleness.

Then he withdrew to his chamber, and bathed his head with cold water, and freshened his toilet from the instinct of habit.

"Lady Hartrington said truly," thought he, "I must dine somewhere,—and, day after day, life must go on with all its old common-place details. Of course, I shall get over this sudden fever,—men always do, people say. 'Man's love is of his life a thing apart,' that's Byron, I know. Yet somehow his loves mixed themselves up pretty considerably with his whole existence. And who was it that cried,

' If she be not so to me,
What care I how fair she be !'

Ah, but he did care, or he would not have sung so defiant a song. Yet how strange it is that I cannot wish to forget this girl,—that I would not, if I could, wash away the memory of her, as I now wash the dust of the day from my hands. Oh, yes, I must dine somewhere. So I will be off to my club, where, at this time of the

year, there is likely to be as pretty a solitude as my heart can desire."

So Algernon Raybrooke sauntered to Pall Mall, and sat down to the customary fish, flesh, and fowl of a club dinner, with what appetite is not related. Then he read the evening papers with great diligence, smoked two cigars instead of one, and tossed away the last number of *Punch*, pronouncing it the stupidest he had ever seen. Later in the evening, he met an acquaintance, and, by common consent, they adjourned to one of the theatres, in time to witness the performance of a new farce, which, on every previous representation, it was said, had kept the audience in a roar. Algernon's companion indulged in hearty laughter, and it being evidently the proper thing to appreciate the piece and applaud a favourite actor, Raybrooke strove to share in the prevailing merriment; but, in his heart, he thought the whole affair buffoonery, and wished himself out of the noise.

The next morning, Algernon found that his landlady had taken compassion on the poor flowers, and placed them in water, to adorn his table. They were his *vis-à-vis* all breakfast time;

but when he had swallowed his coffee and crunched his toast, he took the *bouquet* from the vase, cut the string, and began, one by one, to throw the flowers on the back of the fire. All, as yet, retained their freshness, except the crimson and purple bells of the quickly fading fuchsias ; dead, dead as his own hopes were these, and he threw them the first on the funeral pyre. A pale rose dropped its perfumed leaves as he lifted it, but the bright geraniums were perfect in beauty when they were consigned to the flames ; the heliotropes scarcely touched by decay ; and exotics of wax-like texture pleaded, but in vain, that their beauty might stay execution. Only a few sprigs of mignonette remained, when a sudden relenting stayed his hand. From these he shook the drops of water, and, as the smoke wreathed and curled, making fantastic images among the brighter blossoms, he wiped the moisture from the humble little flowers, and placed them carefully at the bottom of his travelling writing-case. "I am off to Brighton this afternoon," he said to his landlady, an hour later, "and may not be in London again for a month."

Then he wrote a short letter to his brother, to await his arrival off Portsmouth, and afterwards adjourned to his club, to hear the latest morning news.

Surely, the differences of sex are never more broadly and specially marked than in seasons of mental disquietude and heart trouble! Woman—though, at last, she may have her triumph through the sheer force and courage of endurance—woman, the thorough woman, bows her head and folds her hands, and by every mute gesture and tearful entreaty “implores peace;” peace for her silent wrestle; peace for the slow subduing of her first agony. But man, the thorough man, leaps up in spirit from a staggering blow, or wrests himself from a painful captivity. If he drags the broken chain at his heels, it may be that at every step he breaks off a link, or loosens a rivet, and finds, as is fit in the creature of action, an assuagement of grief in active scenes and energetic employment.

In proportion as a woman may have masculine attributes, she also will probably rouse herself to exertion as a distraction from sorrow; and in proportion as a man possesses womanly

tenderness, and a feminine capacity for soul-suffering, will he need some interval in which to conquer by endurance. And as Algernon Raybrooke, we have already remarked, was not without the morsel of womanly clay in his composition, he, for awhile, alternated between hours of bitter endurance and the time spent in the gay society of surely the gayest town that ever dipped down to the sea.

Of course, he met friends and acquaintances by the dozen. The season was just beginning, and people who had professed to be out of health, or out of spirits, forgot the occasion of their coming to Brighton in the enjoyment of the town life they were leading. Even people "out at elbows" seemed to have arisen from that depressing condition; for these black sheep of society, so long as they remain free from the absolute brand of poverty, are not chased out of the pleasure-loving flock.

However, they were members of his own London "set," with whom Raybrooke chiefly dined and chatted, or walked and rode. Also, he played billiards frequently, and improved in

dexterity thereby. He wrote to Lady Hartrington, from Brighton, once or twice, but of course, he had no other confidant of his sudden passion and its sudden blighting. He struggled hard to be reconciled to his fate; and, as no honest struggle of such a sort is ever wholly unavailing, his active mind obtained some measure of victory. At the end of a fortnight he was able to take up the dropped thread of his readings on political economy with sufficiently studious attention, and to rekindle the fire of his ambition, which he now desired should draw all other embers of dead hopes into its flame. And even at this holiday season, and to pleasure-devoted Brighton, did business follow at the heels of the young M.P. He found himself entangled in correspondence with his constituents concerning certain of their local affairs, which they looked at solely from the point of view of their own interests. But to him these railway wrongs and canal controversies were somewhat microscopic, and by no means constituted the themes he desired to discuss with British senators.

After a storm at sea the waters may seem

lulled, while yet there is a ground-swell to perplex the voyager, and tax to the uttermost a pilot's skill. In like manner, consequent on great mental disturbance, the heart, the mind, the temper, have their ground-swell, long after the storm seems to have blown over; and it is just at these times that poor human nature so often finds vicarious, instead of legitimate, objects on which to vent its displeasure. Algernon Raybrooke was too much of a gentleman to be rude or even uncourteous to the worthy burghers whose interests he represented, but in his present mood he could not see their needs as they saw them, and did not show himself quite ready to place himself at their desired point of view.

Letters grew more instead of less ceremonious between them. And when the correspondence dropped, half Fordinghill had decided that their new Liberal member was very much prouder and a precious deal less obliging than their old Tory champion, whom he had displaced. In short, the electors were in a humour to nurse and cherish their wrath, keeping it warm for future service; and when some of his defenders

pleaded his youth and inexperience, the objectors growled out in reply : " Ah, served us just right for bringing in such a boy ! "

CHAPTER XVI.

AN OLD SCANDAL REVIVED.

Bien souvent le passé couvre plus d'un secret
 Dont sur un mur vieilli la tache reparait !
 Toute ancienne muraille est noire.

VICTOR HUGO.

IN the buried past of twenty years since, a seed had been sown which had germinated, and was now showing forth its sickly blossoms setting into bitter fruit.

A lawless deed and a desperate criminal act—in part unknown to man, in part the story garbled and distorted till foul looked fair, and obloquy was heaped on one culprit—had turned Mrs. Appersley's heart in bitter hatred against Hester Otway. And wild with fear lest a young man's "liking" should grow to love, she had bent all

the powers of a strong will, and a life-long influence over two young people, to bring about the engagement between Catherine Freeth and her cousin Reuben. Since first she laid her plans, not once had she wavered; and content in wishes fulfilled, she had not asked herself if blessings ever descended in answer to the outcry of hatred or revenge.

Indeed, she thought herself a happy woman, as she watched the mellowed Autumn sunset from that same window where we saw her anxiously awaiting her son on a former memorable occasion. The sun to-night went down just between two of the famous old oaks, and its beams reddened the few leaves that still hung, like little fairy flags, from the otherwise bare branches. The equinoctial gales had done their work, and made the trees already look winterly; but the day had been bright and fine, and Reuben had taken his gun, intending to indulge in pheasant shooting. The report of his fowling-piece had warned her that he must be near home, and she opined that he could not have had very much sport, seeing that he had not started early, having had several letters to

write. She did not know that one letter had not been entrusted to the bag—always examined by herself—the posting of which letter had taken Reuben Appersley considerably out of his way.

However, the birds had not been shy ; he had bagged both pheasants and partridges, though he came home but slenderly laden. The truth is, he had found himself within easy reach of a station, and had bethought him to send on his man with divers “braces” and “leashes,” directed to Telford House, Westminster.

How handsome he looked, as, walking up the broad gravel path nearly facing the window, he gave his mother a smiling nod, perceiving her on the watch for his return. On him, at least, no visible shadow had yet fallen ; but if the proud and well-contented mother could have had for that one evening the vision of a seer, surely she would have been appalled at the consequences of her eager self-will.

The young sportsman was ready for a hearty meal ; and it was one of Mrs. Appersley's old-fashioned, womanly delights to recognize in son or guests a good “country appetite.” She heard him order the careful cleaning of his gun,

and admired his sensible caution. Later in the evening, when the curtains were drawn, he leaned back in his chair, with the county newspaper in his hand, and read aloud, for his mother's amusement, the most interesting paragraphs; her knitting-needles moving with something like a rhythm to his voice; and assuredly she felt that she had the best son in the world,—a son whom she a little grudged as a husband even to her favourite Catherine, but whose wife would undoubtedly be the very luckiest and happiest woman in England.

Could she, I say, have looked into Catherine's heart at that moment, she would have reeled, I think, as from a death-blow. For it was the evening on which Catherine first met Algernon Raybrooke; and the betrothed girl was at this moment seated by his side, feeling that his voice, his words, rent away a cloud that had hid from herself her own heart, and becoming momentarily more and more conscious that the mere presence of this stranger awakened in her nature new emotions.

But Mrs. Appersley was no seer, nor of the fine clay through which "coming events cast

their shadows" on the soul. By dint of determination of character, and a position of some influence, she did frequently bring to pass that which she willed; and so, in an outer sense, was sometimes a prophet. But when very subtle influences came into play, or very finely-strung temperaments were deeply moved, she had less influence than a child has often exercised.

Suddenly, Reuben faltered in the reading of some local gossip. What business had penny-a-liners to rake up family history, and, for the sake of a convenient *à propos*, and the pungent winding up of a sentence, to probe old wounds afresh?

"Why do you stop?" said Mrs. Appersley, swinging round her knitting to begin a fresh row.

"Oh, it was not worth while to go on," replied Reuben, trying, quite unsuccessfully, to allay his mother's curiosity.

"Reuben, there is something you do not choose me to know. Give me the paper directly!"

As Mrs. Appersley spoke, she laid down her knitting and readjusted her spectacles; then

stretched out her hand, as if expecting prompt obedience.

"No, mother, I'll not give you the paper till I've quite done with it," said Reuben in a voice of great tenderness. "After all, it is a mere passing allusion to the circumstances of my poor father's death; and if I had had the least tact and presence of mind, I dare say you would never have seen it."

"What is it, Reuben? I insist upon knowing. Don't treat me like a child, I beg."

"It must be written by some confounded Radical," cried Reuben, evading a direct answer. "I have suspected for weeks past that the *Meudshire Chronicle* was changing its politics, and now I am sure of it. It is only because I am a Tory that they say such a thing. Oh! how I should like to horsewhip the whole set! But if you *will* see it, my dear mother, you must. There," continued Reuben, pointing to a paragraph, "only three or four lines, and no names mentioned, after all."

Mrs Appersley changed colour slightly as she read, and then said, with scornful anger:

"No names are mentioned, it is true; but

everyone in the county will know whom the writer means."

"Perhaps so," returned the son; "and yet I don't know. A new generation cares but little for old scandals. Mother," he continued, after a slight pause, "I should never have pained you by reminding you of these things; but now that the subject has arisen, do tell me the exact circumstances. I was such a little child for years after my father's death, and really what you have sometimes stated to me seems to make but a vague and indistinct story. I think I ought to know the whole truth, from beginning to end."

"Your father had enemies, who told lies about him."

"Yes, so you have often said."

"Not that he was without faults. If he had followed my advice, he might have been a rich man, and perhaps alive now. He was a great deal too fond of horses, and lost a fortune by them."

"But how was it he made enemies?" asked Reuben, perceiving his mother pause in her narrative.

"A great deal of enmity was born of mere envy," replied the widow, "for he was the handsomest man in the county; though a little spite, perhaps, was provoked by his warm temper and satirical tongue."

"I should be inclined to reverse the proportions of the causes," said Reuben, with a smile; "it is a thoroughly bad heart that hates any one for his good gifts."

"There are plenty of what you would call bad hearts in the world. I call them only specimens of human nature."

"But, mother, tell me truly, and without scruple, what was the worst his enemies said of him?"

"In the first place, they hinted that he cheated on the turf by bribing jockeys to lose; and then, after his sudden death, when the inquest and all those dreadful proceedings were over, the most shocking story of all was circulated; but, Reuben, I am sorry you have asked me to talk of these things."

"Mother, I ought to know."

"Well, this was it. They got some London druggist to declare that he had sold certain

drugs to a person answering to the description of your poor father. Drugs that would have caused just such a death as that which happened to the Favourite the very day before my poor dear husband himself was taken off. Oh, Reuben, repeating these vile stories brings back the old trouble and the old indignation ; you should not have asked me to rake up the past."

"Mother, my distress is greater than yours, inasmuch as I am grieving you, as well as sorrowing that such things should have been ; and yet I ought to know everything. I ought to be quite aware of all that ever was said, if only that I may at all times be prepared to defend my father's memory. But tell me what means that allusion to madness in the family, or else something worse."

"Must I tell you ? Well, the greatest lie of all—if one lie can be greater than another—was a lie that got whispered about just before that wretch Otway decamped. Nobody could tell who first started the story, but it was insinuated that perhaps, after all, the squire did not die of heart spasm, as was reported, nor of any 'natural death,' as the coroner's verdict declar-

ed, but poisoned himself to avoid disgrace.

"How dreadful an idea! Oh, mother, how much you must have suffered!" exclaimed Reuben, with deep emotion, and rising to caress her tenderly.

"Suffered,—yes, only I thought these falsehoods must have faded out of memory."

"It is very cruel to revive such slanders," mused Reuben; "but why do you call Otway a wretch?"

"Because he was alway leading your father into imprudences, and then, when he might have made some amends—when, by reiterating and re-asserting the evidence which he had given at the inquest, he might have put down the slander—he chose to abscond; just to run away from his own contemptible difficulties."

"His evidence, mother? I don't quite understand."

"He was sleeping in the same hotel in which your father was found lying at the point of death; and, as a medical man, was naturally called in. Consequently, his evidence was received at the inquest as most important, especially as everyone knew that he had attended

our family for years. What he was able to say proved that it was a sudden spasm of which your father died. People talk a great deal more of their hearts nowadays than they did then ; but my opinion is, hearts were much the same twenty years ago as they are now, and I am sure such a run of ill luck as he had, losing thousands upon thousands year after year, was enough to give anybody palpitations. I am not fanciful nor fantastic, but I cannot tell what I should have felt, or how I should have behaved, if I had known all that was going on, and the risks he ran. It was bad enough to hear of the losses when they could not be kept from me. Oh, Reuben, the betting propensity is very like the drunkard's, and total abstinence is the only cure."

"Perhaps so. But as I never had the propensity, it cost me very little to promise you that I never would bet."

"I am glad that you had not your father's temptations ; but you must not judge me hardly for extorting that promise. You say it cost you little to make ; and it has given me great peace of mind."

"Thank you, mother, for saying so. I am afraid, after hearing this history, I shall hate that cup"—turning his head in the direction of the treasured glass-covered memento—"I am afraid it will always recall more painful memories than pleasant ones. What do you say to melting it into gew-gaws for my darling Kate? I want to make her a present."

"No, Reuben, certainly not," replied Mrs. Appersley, with grave decision; "to remove that cup from its stand, would be like shirking a reminder of your father's connection with the turf, and a tacit insult to his memory. As for giving Kate jewelry, I should think you could afford it very well; for so far as I make out, you must have heaps of money at your banker's."

A faint smile passed over his countenance as she spoke the last words, but he only said: "Well, perhaps you are right; and of course it was not the money I wanted."

Mrs. Appersley had the common fault of self-willed people. She was deficient in the power of sympathy. She knew that she had been moved and agitated by this painful conver-

sation, but she did not realize how keenly her son had felt the biting malice of the slanders she had described to him. She was even slightly vexed with him for leading the conversation to such results; and though, finally, mother and son agreed that it was best not to take notice of the unkind newspaper paragraph, Mrs. Appersley went off to bed with a half fractious "good night," and a less tender kiss than usual.

And then Reuben told the servants that they also might go to bed; that he would take care the doors were fastened, for he was going to smoke a cigar in the garden.

Tired as he had thought himself in the early part of the evening, he paced the garden paths, up and down, and round and round, for upwards of an hour. Somehow, to-night there was more tumult in his life than he remembered ever before to have experienced. Some events in his father's career, and, notably, the circumstances of his death, weighed upon Reuben's mind with unmitigated pain. Across the dark story there flitted the phantom of Hester Otway; and he wondered how so charming a girl—

for that she certainly was—could have been born of so weak and mean a father; and then, when he resolutely determined to turn his mind into pleasanter channels, and think only of his blooming Kate and their approaching marriage, a letter from Lionel, which he had that day received and answered, would be present to his mind, with dim mysterious augury. He had admired and loved Lionel as already a dear younger brother, and that letter, generously as he had responded to it, had given him a surprise that was almost a shock.

Finally, however, the ruling passion obtained the mastery. Memory and hope, reality and fancy, fears and wishes, all merged into the one absorbing thought of Catherine, till her voice seemed sounding in his ears, her light touch resting on his arm, her sweet eyes looking up to his. And the trouble was lifted, and Reuben Appersley was happy in the dreams of love, and youth, as they seemed to fill the chambers of his mind, and saturate his being.

Alas, alas! the same waning, gibbous moon that climbed the London sky was shining on Five Oaks, making the old trees look weird and

spectre-like. The shadows lay dark in the shrubbery, and the light rested in patches on the lawn, and the red gleam of Reuben's cigar might have been seen fitfully, as he paced along, now in the shadow, now in moonlight. More than once did he rehearse from memory the last letter he had received from her he so worshipped, and which had seemed to him a perfection like herself.

At that very hour Catherine Freeth was eagerly striving to remove his ring from her finger, and had already sundered her soul from the contract which bound them to each other.

CHAPTER XVII.

LETTERS.

When we remember all the tears
 Which Letters have provoked,
 The written wrong, the vows revoked,
 Through many vanished years,

We feel that staring words have spell
 To wound like arrow tips ;
 Though had they dropped from loving lips
 We might have borne them well :

Or back replied with eager speech
 And brought the truth to light,
 And weighed the wrong and showed the right,
 With even scales for each.

CATHERINE FREETH was not like Edith Aylmer—the sort of woman to “thin” in a day. In the affluence of her youth and magnificent health, a great struggle went on in her soul for many days, without showing that out-

ward devastation which would have betrayed it.

But battles may be fought in a few hours which are to change the fate of empires, and battles of the heart may be swift, yet murderous, and leave for their results mighty changes and lasting consequences.

Another day, and another, passed away in the aching monotony of routine employment and the sickness of "hope deferred." Algernon Raybrooke made no sign, and as the hours crept by, to the wretched enthrallment of her betrothal was added a new misery. A sense of humiliation would make itself felt. A conviction gained upon her that she had yielded to a delusion, been cheated by an unworthy vanity, that to Algernon Raybrooke she had only been the pleasant acquaintance of an evening, while to her he was a power that had turned the current of her life, revealing to her depths of her own nature unfathomed, unsuspected before.

Still, through all the misery, one conclusion—like a goal which somehow must be reached—never ceased to be clear—she must break her engagement to her cousin Reuben ; she must never be his wife. With natural maidenly re-

serve she would keep sacred her heart's secret, and only admit, with shame and sorrow, that she did not love him as a husband should be loved. This, then, was her persistent resolve; but to initiate the rupture herself, without friendly assistance or support, and without any apparent provocation, was a task that seemed the more painful the longer it was deferred.

Should she throw herself on her mother's sympathy, and beseech her to strike the blow and break her fetters? Ah, no; it would be cruel and useless thus to agonise her mother, whose own love had been the love of her life, and who never could comprehend or tolerate fickleness of the affections. Of course, she must apprise her parents, and that speedily, of her intention; but she would give them no burden to bear which she, by any possibility, could lift from them.

And, meanwhile, Catherine sat at meals with her family—owning to want of appetite, it is true; and joined in the ordinary domestic babble without calling black white, or uttering sheer nonsense; and she seemed to read, and she did execute needle-work, and she even played

Beethoven and Mendelssohn, when asked for a "little music," with more than average expression. She did all this just as thousands of women have done, and will do, with a paramount thought, an unknown, unsuspected trouble weighing down their souls.

But the third night she slept better, and, waking physically refreshed, felt stronger and braver, and came down to breakfast, resolved this day to write to Reuben, and to inform her parents that she was cancelling her engagement. She nerved herself to look at her conduct in its ugliest aspect, and knew that she must bow her head, and meekly confess herself "a jilt."

To Catherine's surprise, her father's place was vacant. He had been summoned at a very early hour by telegraph to one of the Eastern counties, in consequence of an accident to engineering works with which he was connected, and was off, by special train, to the scene of the disaster. Mrs. Freeth was in tears. This giving way of the great Fenfield dam, and flooding the foundations of the new viaduct, was a grave sorrow, imperilling Hubert

Freeth's reputation, as well as threatening great loss of property to the firm. And Catherine found that her duty for to-day was to be prop and comforter to her mother.

Clearly, it was incumbent on her to hide her own especial trouble yet a little longer. Not this the moment to add another anxiety to that which was pressing on her parents so heavily. I do not say that she was wholly insensible to a momentary relief, such as we all feel when the performance of a painful duty is imperatively postponed.

Presently the morning letters were delivered, and Mrs. Freeth, still weeping for the Fenfield disaster, left her own for awhile unopened, and took little interest in some which her daughters received. Generally speaking, in that family, letters—always excepting those of Reuben to Catherine—were considered public property, and either read aloud, or passed round the table—a plan often admired by the heads of families, but which, perhaps, is more specious than excellent. When once understood by correspondents, it crushes spontaneity, generous confidence, and every quality which renders

the letter of a friend the best substitute for his presence. And this, at the same time that it tempts even the most candid to be guilty of little subterfuges. There were two letters for Catherine that morning,—one from Reuben, and one from her brother Lionel. But in the latter there was carefully and unobtrusively inclosed a postscript, written on a separate half-sheet of thin paper, and headed, "To Kate alone, quite private."

Catherine did not love secrets and mysteries; nevertheless, she managed to slip the envelope with postscript unremoved into her pocket, before she read and commented on Lionel's chit-chat letter. Very soon, however, she withdrew to her own room, curious and anxious to know what Lionel had to say. As for Reuben Appersley's letter the reading it had been a great agony—for it seemed inexpressibly affectionate, and with a vein of refined tenderness throughout that pierced her with remorse.

Lionel's postscript was as follows :—

"DEAREST KATE,

" I have a great secret, which I hasten to confide to you, lest you should hear it

first from Reuben, which I should dislike to be the case. What a trump of a cousin he is! or brother, indeed, as I shall henceforth call him. Do not start when I tell you that three days ago I had the most urgent need of five hundred pounds! I did not want the money to pay bills extravagantly incurred,—so don't be frightened about me on that score; nor to pay gambling debts, nor to return borrowed money; nor did I want the money for any selfish pleasure—unless it is a selfish pleasure to do what every fibre of the mind declares must be done, to avoid feeling one's self a paltry cur for ever. I wanted the money with a great and urgent need; but what that need was, I cannot tell even you, my darling sister. I could not ask my father, for he would have insisted on knowing the why and wherefore, and hearing the whole story, from a to z; and, after all, the secret is more that of another person than mine. Moreover, I doubt if the Governor has money to spare just now. So, under all the hidden circumstances, I wrote to Reuben, saying to him far less than I am telling you, but boldly asking him to lend me five hundred pounds for an indefinite period,

though to be paid, I assure you, as soon as I can pay it. He answered me beautifully,—you shall see the letter some day ; though, of course, I know it was Kate's brother he thought of, rather than 'Cousin Li.' I could feel that to be the case ; in every word he wrote, his heart seemed so brimming with its adoration that he could not help showing it. Fine fellow that he is, he sent me a check by return of post ; and for fear his mother should ask questions, did not even let her know that he had heard from or was writing to me. Though I urged him to consider the affair strictly confidential, doubtless he will talk it over with you ; indeed, I said something about you and he being one. Some day this mighty mystery may be explained ; till then, pray love and trust me. Will you, dear Kate, supplement my thanks to Reuben ? I feel that I have only thanked him coldly and formally, as a man may. *Burn this."*

As Catherine Freeth read these lines, a cold shudder passed through her frame,—just as in tropical climes a chill wind rushes by a minute before the windows of heaven open, and torrents of rain begin to fall. When she had finished, she

glanced back at two or three of the sentences; "brimming with adoration," "supplement my thanks," had seemed to blind her as she read; and then she dropped her head on the cushion of her hands, and burst into a flood of tears.

Not yet had Victor Hugo written his prose poem,—his *Story of the Sea*; but I think somewhat as Catherine Freeth felt now did Gilliott feel when the *Pieuvre*, that monster of the deep—soft, yet strong; toothless, yet deadly—began twining its whip-like thongs about his limbs. Doubtless she was over-sensitive; what thorough woman is not? Doubtless, she did not look forward through a long vista of years with calm and searching gaze, or trace a chain of consequences with logical precision, and finally perceive that the present knot was of the gordian order,—to be promptly and sharply dealt with. Women are not sword-bearers, and, perhaps to the detriment of their own peace—or power (?)—are a little too apt to sit down, and, with pathetic patience, strive to unravel the hard knots that bind them, instead of hacking away with any blade, sharp or blunt, which comes to hand.

Never had Catherine wept such tears as these. Somebody talks of the "black hoof" of Care. Has Care also its sharp horns, on which to toss about its victim from one vain hope to another, only to make the final trampling more cruel? It was really the pure unselfishness of Catherine's nature, its impulsive generosity, which caused her intense suffering now. The personal endurance of sorrow seemed so much easier a thing than the act of inflicting it.

How could she shape her thoughts to speech, and how could her hand pen the words which should tell Reuben Appersley she did not love him, just at the time when he had given such a tangible proof of his love, and when her brother had appealed to her to repay?

"Oh, Lionel, Lionel," she murmured; "you know not what you have done!"

Then she read her brother's lines again, and saw within the envelope yet another morsel of paper, on which was written:

"I was nearly drowned last week, but you perceive I survive to tell the story. No harm done, not even a cold. A fine fellow saved me at the risk of his life. I shall bring him to see

you at the next vacation ; meanwhile, string his name—Cuthbert Rawlins—on the rosary of your friends. Tell my mother about it without frightening her, lest she should hear of it some other way.”

Nearly drowned ! Well, the news did not stir Catherine as much as might have been expected, though, at the moment, she wondered he had not given that piece of information, and with fuller details, in the letter itself, instead of separating it like the other confidential communication, with which, of course, it now became always associated. Then she asked herself who Cuthbert Rawlins could be ; and a dim recollection came up of Lionel having before mentioned the name as that of a new Cambridge acquaintance—a college “chum.”

Again and again Catherine read over Reuben’s manly and tender letter, in which Lionel was not even mentioned ; and each time she felt the more keenly that the writer deserved from her good, and not evil. She must write to him by return post, not only because he complained of her many days’ silence, but because he sent some messages which required an-

swers. And so, with aching heart, she sat down to her desk, humiliated in her own eyes, and wrote a right cousinly epistle, answering all the questions with precision, and going deeply into the circumstances of the Fenfield disaster. As she still wrote "My dearest Reuben," and signed herself, "affectionately," she persuaded herself that there was no difference in her style and manner, and that yet a little longer Reuben must be blind to the truth.

And when her letter was posted, she hated herself worse than before; and almost decided to correct it by a short, bold, blunt avowal: "I do not love you, Cousin Reuben; you are true, and I am false; you are good, and I am ungrateful; forget and despise me, but pity me a little."

Almost did she decide thus to write; but, behold, her mother, still tearful and anxious—fretting that the telegram which was to relieve her fears had not arrived—full of vague dread and real sorrow. And Catherine had not the courage to bring down another avalanche.

Late at night the promised message arrived.

But it was only half satisfactory, and told that Hubert Freeth would be absent from home for at least a week.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN ACCIDENTAL DISCOVERY.

And which the harder I cannot tell,
To hide true love, or make false love look well.

SIR JOHN SUCKLING.

Sick Hope sat shivering 'neath a leaden sky,
Whence rainbow hues had faded one by one ;
And heard her sister Fear, with plaintive cry,
Wake echoes sharp of every mournful tone.

THE next day passed away more rapidly than the last had done, for Catherine set herself resolutely to comfort her mother, and the attempt forced her thoughts, at least fitfully, from the one channel which had engulfed them. True, the frequent sudden return of her mind to its own especial grief was each time a new agony,

something like that we experience on awakening from sleep in times of trouble ; but the brave effort to think of others and forget herself brought its reward.

In the afternoon Mrs. Brindley and her daughter called. The newspapers not having just now any special political event, mysterious robbery, dreadful murder, or fatal shipwreck in hand, made much of the giving way of the Fenfield dam, and by dint of sheer verbosity, and a few strong expressions, their reports produced the effect of an exaggeration, without being absolutely false. Mrs. Brindley had read more than one account, and came prepared to offer friendly sympathy—and was extremely anxious to hear the truth.

“My dear soul!” she exclaimed, when she had listened to all Mrs. Freeth could tell her, “why did you not send for me yesterday? Though, indeed, it was the merest chance I was not here, not having seen you all the week.”

“You are very kind,” replied Mrs. Freeth, “and I am sure I should have sent for you, had there been anything to do, for I rely so much

on your judgment. But this is a sort of thing in which we women can do nothing."

"Only," said Mrs Brindley, almost interrupting her, "only it is highly desirable that mischievous reports should be checked. I dare say the truth is quite bad enough, without people being allowed to fancy that the viaduct never will be safe."

"I have a few lines from Hubert this morning, in which he says that if he can only get certain work done before the high tides of tomorrow, all danger of further damage will be over, and that the engineers, knowing, better than they did before, the difficulties to be overcome, the repairs will in reality make the whole thing more secure than ever. But, of course, I am very anxious for the next post, and very anxious to know how Uncle Thomas feels about the thing. I had rather a curt message from him yesterday."

"I can imagine that the old man is dreadfully grieved. Well, if any one in the world can, as the saying is, 'do the impossible,' it is Mr. Freeth. Ah, young people do not know

what great anxieties are; do they, Mrs. Freeth?"

And Mrs. Brindley, babbling on, without always expecting an answer to her questions, turned towards Catherine and Aline, as she spoke.

"I don't expect children to understand these things," said Mrs. Freeth, with a little warmth, "and it would be cruel to wish them to do so; but I believe Kate feels this catastrophe as much as I do. Indeed, she seemed stunned by it yesterday,—but Kate, my darling, don't cry; what have I said to bring tears? Why, just now you were cheering me up."

"I shall be better presently, mamma. There; it is all over." And, hating herself for a hypocrite, the very self-scorn seemed to dry up her tears.

Mrs. Brindley looked at Catherine intently, fairly puzzled at this depth of feeling and depth of grief, at one of those worldly troubles which usually wound the young so slightly; while Aline slipped her little hand into that of Catherine, with a half-timid and yet caressing pressure, full of love and sympathy,—sympathy.

with the sorrow that was apparent, without speculating on its cause.

"Of course there are exceptions to every rule," proceeded Mrs. Brindley; "and your dear Catherine is more matured in character than most young girls. But, I declare, I have been here half an hour, and I have never yet inquired after Lionel."

"He is quite well, thank you," said Catherine. "I had a letter from him yesterday."

"But he was nearly drowned last week, boating," said Mrs. Freeth, to whom Catherine had communicated that information, not in the body of the letter, she supposed, lest, suddenly told, it should shock his mother.

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Mrs. Brindley. "Well, for my part," she continued, "I wonder accidents are not more frequent at Cambridge. Young men are so careless, and their boats are such mere nutshells."

Now, all this time Aline's hand had remained clasped by Catherine; but, as Mrs. Freeth spoke, Catherine was conscious that the fingers within her grasp fluttered like the wings of an imprisoned bird. It was probably an involuntary

movement, of which the young girl herself was unconscious. Often we can bear pain the better for having something to clutch; for, to steady the hand is like guarding an outpost; and, certainly, the trembling hand is often a sign of a trembling heart. Catherine felt this truth intuitively, without reasoning about it; and that little flutter, quickly overcome, revealed to her a history. Gently she loosened her clasp; the hand was withdrawn, and Aline sat motionless as a statue, only for a few moments pale like one, and then her cheek flushed to a deeper pink than it usually wore.

Catherine understood it all,—Lionel's "domesticity" during the past Winter, and the chess-playing at which she had smiled. Indeed, she wondered that many a little sign she now interpreted had remained unnoticed; but sure as she felt that Lionel and Aline were dear to each other, so sure, also, was she that their love was as yet unspoken. Was it to wither and die in that chrysalis form, or burst from the shell of silence into free and fuller life? Her heart leaped towards Aline Brindley with an emotion, half sympathy, half compassion;

for, at that moment, the shadows in her own soul stretched far and wide, and dimmed the lustre of all love to her own mind, and she thought, whatever came of this attachment, some trouble must be entangled with it.

But a secret so surprised was very sacred with her, and Aline never suspected that the kiss Catherine gave her at parting was meant as a sisterly one.

It was good for Catherine to have made this discovery, since it opened out a new interest in her life, and gave her food for thought and observation, and, by degrees, the dark shadows shrank back, and she began to think that, after all, this love might be one to run smooth. Ay, and to hope so, too, for Catherine had one of those fine natures, which, even in seasons of personal trouble, can bask in the reflected happiness of others, and rather dispense with sympathy itself, than purchase it at the price of another's sorrowful experience.

Surely, she argued to herself, the parents would raise no objections to the alliance, for Lionel could hardly find a more amiable and accomplished wife—not wholly portionless, either,

a circumstance, Catherine smiled to think, never without weight among the elders. While, on the other hand, clever Lionel, "called to the bar," with good expectations, and all the influence of his father's name, would, in due time, be a good match even in the eyes of a more ambitious mother than Mrs. Brindley seemed to be. This castle-building for others was another distraction of mind for Catherine, and did her good. Really, it would seem that she was learning to carry her secret burden of trouble more and more steadily; and yet when her thoughts, from time to time, swooped down upon it, her very soul cried out in agony, "How long, how long must it be borne, and through what pain and humiliation must I be released?"

Thinking over Catherine Freeth's history, I have often speculated what her fate might have been, if she had only been moderately selfish and self-willed. If, for instance, ignoring that Reuben Appersley had wooed her before the tide of her father's prosperity had risen; indulging in no sentimental shrinking from pain-ing her parents in a time of trouble; and, declining to participate in Lionel's obligations,

she had written to her cousin, clearly and decisively, breaking off their engagement. There are so many cosy and comfortable quarters in this world, expressly appropriated to the selfish and self-willed, that I incline to think she would have dropped into one of them, duly garnished for her service. It was only to say, "I do not love you, Cousin Reuben; the reason why I *will* not tell;" to say it at once, without waiting for better opportunity,—without caring whom she grieved!

And, indeed, some moralists may say such conduct would have been altogether prudent and correct, though probably they would have delivered a long-delayed judgment, based upon the consequences of the conduct. There is sometimes a crisis in life, with turnings from it so dismal, that whichever is not taken is pretty sure to be looked back on, in the end, with feelings of lingering regret.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

Should auld acquaintance be forgot
 And never brought to min' ?
 Should auld acquaintance be forgot
 And days o' lang syne ?

BURNS.

IT was a November-like morning, though still but the last week of October; a chill and dingy stagnant fog shrouded the neighbouring buildings, from which here and there glimmered a yellowish light, where the ready gas had been kindled in aid of the feeble daylight.

As a small misery of life that tries the temper and depresses the spirits, commend me to a candlelight morning toilet, and an illuminated breakfast-table!

Though the blinds were pulled up to the top, for the daylight to stare through if it could, some gas-burners helped to make the gloom visible at Telford House that cheerless morning. The family had just finished breakfast. Mrs. Freeth was searching in the *Times* for a further report from Fenfield, and the post was in without bringing letters of any importance. Perhaps Catherine had rather expected a letter from Five Oaks in reply to hers of two days ago; but if so, her cousin's silence must have been a relief. What did happen was wholly unthought of and unexpected.

A hansom cab drove up swiftly to the door, and out of it sprang Reuben Appersley. True, he had not written, but he had travelled by the mail train, and after taking half a night's rest, with very little sleep, at the railway hotel, had come straight to Catherine's side, to ask a simple question or two.

The children uttered an exclamation of delight, as they saw from the window who it was that was at the door,—for at this moment the fog was a little lighter, and permitted him to be recognized, Catherine did not speak, but,

by an impulse or instinct, she glided from the room before the street door could be opened. Everybody thought she had gone out to welcome Reuben, though her mother a little wondered at her precipitance. But Catherine had not advanced towards the guest; she had retreated to the drawing-room, where the housemaid was just gathering up her dusters and brushes after lighting the fire, and Jane Freeth was opening the piano in readiness for her morning music-lesson.

"Jenny, dear," said Catherine, "please not now. Ask Miss Otway to hear you by and by. Go, to prevent her coming upstairs; there's a dear girl."

Jane looked at her sister, puzzled at the request, and sorry for it, but she was obedient, and closed the piano gently, leaving, however, a piece of music upon it.

"Kate, dear, are you not well?" said the affectionate girl, still lingering, and now noticing that Catherine was unusually grave.

"Oh, yes, I am well, as well as one can be in such weather; but I want to speak to Reuben—don't you know he has come?"

"Oh, has he? I'll go directly and tell him you are here. I am so delighted; you did not expect him though, did, you?"

"No, I did not expect him."

But Jane hardly waited for her sister's reply; it seemed to her so right and natural that the lovers should meet as soon as possible, and have a *tête-à-tête*, by all means. Half child, half woman as yet, her dreams of love and marriage were all of purity and deathless faith, lit by the rosy glow of young romance.

"How do you do, Jenny?" said Reuben, as he saw her on the staircase, and gave her a brotherly kiss. "Is Catherine in the drawing-room? Phoebe said she thought so."

"Yes, and all alone. I am going down to the school-room. Oh, Cousin Reuben, we have such a nice governess now!" And the young girl tripped gaily down the stairs, not meeting Miss Otway, as she had expected to do. Hester had been among those who, of necessity, first greeted the visitor, He had shaken hands with her hurriedly, uttered some friendly words of recognition, but their eyes had not fairly met, and just now the governess was stooping

over a newspaper, as if she had recently found in it some subject of absorbing interest. However, little Jenny's request, that the music-lesson might be postponed, aroused her from her abstraction, and five minutes later Hester might have been seen in the school-room, commencing, with her pupils, the duties of the day.

Mrs. Freeth had hurriedly informed Reuben of the last news from Fenfield, but was fully occupied with Lucy the next minute, and rejoicing in the discovery of two additional dental arrivals, more precious than pearls, and unannounced by pain or fretfulness. Decidedly, there was no one of the family just now idle enough to interrupt the interview in the drawing-room.

Catherine was standing in the middle of the room, leaning her hand on the back of a lounging chair when Reuben Appersley entered. She had come to a sudden unprepared determination to tell him at once that she had mistaken her feelings, and loved him only in the calm sisterly manner which their relationship warranted. But when she saw the grave, anxious

expression of his kind face, her heart already almost failed her.

"Catherine, darling!" he exclaimed, as he advanced towards her, with open arms, from which she did not shrink, "What is it all about? what have I done to offend you?"

"Offend me! Nothing, Reuben, nothing; what do you mean? you have always been goodness itself to me."

"Then, why that cold and ceremonious letter?" he replied, "every word of which was like a stab."

"I did not mean it to be cold and ceremonious, but—," and by this time great tears were rolling down Catherine's cheeks.

"But what?" whispered Reuben, with a sad gravity.

No answer.

The question was repeated, while the lover tried to wipe away and kiss away the tears; but this Catherine feebly resisted.

"Reuben," she murmured, "I did not think my letter could so betray me, but the truth must be told. Cousin Reuben, I love you dearly; dearly as I love my own brothers and

sisters, but not as you wish to be loved. Oh, forgive me ! My fickleness, my caprice are without excuse ; I am unworthy of you—I am, indeed.”

Even while she spoke such words as these, she suffered her hand to remain in his clasp, nor did he attempt to drop it. Only with the other hand he shaded his face, to hide the spasm of distress which moved it.

“ Oh, Catherine, this is bitter ! Again I ask what have I done ? ”

“ Nothing,—absolutely nothing ; you are good and true, worthy of a wife true and noble as yourself. ” And now she had released her hand, and was once more trying with quiet energy to take off her diamond ring.

“ Tell me, do the family know all this ? ”

“ No, not a soul. ”

“ Good. ”

“ It was due to you, Reuben, to tell you the truth myself. Oh, if you knew how generous I think you — ”

“ Kate, has any other man been making love to you ? ”

“ No, Reuben. I believe that I shall never marry. ”

"Never marry!" And Reuben burst into a shrill laugh. "I see," he continued, "you are striving to get off the poor ring—let me try."

There was a strange pathetic silence of a minute or two, during which Reuben took the passive hand, and really strove with gentle force to remove the ring. Then finding his efforts ineffectual, he suddenly lifted the hand to his lips, and kissed it again and again tenderly. The next minute he was on his knees before her, just as in happier days he had often placed himself, half in jest, half in seriousness.

"The ring will not come off!" he exclaimed with a sort of gladness, "and I will not give you up. This is only a young girl's fluttering fear. Not marry! The idea is absurd."

"Why absurd? Many women lead single lives; by choice often."

"Ah, but not Catherines—unless they have been wronged or disappointed. Oh, Kate," he continued, "I will make you so happy! Yet not so happy as you will make me. My heart is set upon you; all the treasure of my life is staked on this one venture. My mother, too, it would break her heart for me to give you up."

"Poor aunt! But if she knew the truth, she would soon be reconciled."

"No, she would always dread my marrying some one she did not like—not that I should ever marry at all, which would displease her just as much."

"Reuben, I was wrong to accept you in the first instance; but I did not know my own heart."

"It is my opinion that you do not know it now. Darling, let us look upon all these doubts and fears as a bad dream,—to be forgotten as soon as possible. I am so glad that your trouble—for it has been a trouble, has it not?—has not been known or suspected."

"I have been a coward. It requires courage to proclaim one's self a jilt. It is an ugly name, especially for the eldest sister of a family, to acquire; but that is what I am."

"What you were—in the bad dream. And, as you say, dreadful for an eldest sister. I can see it all. Phoebe and Jane's possible husbands,—everyone of them whistled away at the sound,—even little Lucy with a right to shake her chubby fist at you."

"Don't, Reuben, don't; I cannot bear it." And Catherine burst into a renewed passion of tears.

"Hush, hush! love; you will be heard; do not let people know!"

In truth, Catherine's sobs were heard; but only by Janet Gillespie, who was passing the drawing-room door. It might be that her foot lingered for a moment to make sure of a sound which infinitely distressed her, but the old nurse was too much of a gentlewoman to listen longer. Only she went about her work that morning with a pale, care-worn face, and was a little absent when addressed. She alone of all the household had observed a change in Catherine during the last few days,—a something too vague to be spoken about; but which, nevertheless, had made her anxious. Nor is this to be wondered at. There is a free-masonry among certain people,—the initiation to which is a peculiar baptism of sorrow; and even as in masonry there are apprentices and grand masters, so, in the school of the heart, degrees are taken by which the pupils can recognise one another.

Mrs. Freeth had been wooed and wed, and for

twenty years had been wife and mother, had had a variety of petty cares, and had known a few grave anxieties, but, like many another happy woman, had never experienced a great heart and soul struggle,—a struggle where something dearer than life is at stake, and yet where duties are not clear. Now, Janet had passed through such a fiery ordeal, and knew the signs of its scorching; this was why she could read tokens of trouble, though the loving mother saw nothing amiss.

Catherine soon subdued the violence of her weeping; but the dull sorrow at her heart seemed aggravated rather than abated. Reuben's generosity intensified her own self-scorn,—for indeed she was beginning to despise herself heartily. There are natures here and there, capable of severity and harsh injustice to themselves; natures with a keen but only half-enlightened conscientiousness, and with that womanly spice of cowardice, which is afraid of whole truths and unknown risks. Such natures may be brave, beyond all power of portrayal, to meet life's "sea of troubles," as, like a rising tide, it comes upon them, wave after

wave; but at some eventful moment they lack the power of iron-will and rock-like firmness, and consent to suffer much themselves rather than that others should suffer a little.

After all, it would be a queer sort of world, with more wrangling in it than ever, if women were mightily different from what they are. Surely

" Sweet love were slain,"

if " iron-wills " and " rock-like firmness " were dealt out indiscriminately to both sexes!

I cannot tell how it was, but those light words about her sisters went deep into Catherine's heart. She had thought much of grieving her parents and disgracing herself—of setting an evil example, it may be—but she had not thought of injuring her young sisters; and here was another pang to her already morbid conscience. She was in so excited a state just now that circumstances all got out of perspective with her. Above all, her brother's recent obligation to Reuben loomed in her mind beyond even its just proportion. The central truth that remained to her the least distorted was that Reuben's love was deep and generous, and

wholly blameless, and that for his faith, his benefits, she was returning black ingratitude. As this feeling grew exaggerated, that counterpoise of sentiment and duty which had impelled her to break her engagement warped and shrank, till the question resolved itself rather into one of self-sacrifice than anything else.

She broke the silence which had followed her burst of tears by exclaiming:

"Oh, Reuben, how good you have been to Lionel!"

"Good! Do you mean about that money? Not much, my darling, between brothers. But what a booby to tell you of it."

"It would have been very mean of him not to tell me."

"But, my Kate, it is better not to mention this little affair—I need hardly tell you I never shall."

"I am sure of that. But I wonder what Lionel can have wanted with such a sum of money. Do not you?"

"Perhaps I should wonder a little, if my heart were not full of other thoughts."

By this time he had again taken Catherine's

hand. Every jealous dread had been chased away by her literally true answer to his question about "another man," and he began to feel she was his own again,—with even, it may be, a new halo of perfection gathered round her. Too palpable a display of fondness would have been far more fatal to his affection than any temporary coldness on her part. So Reuben Appersley chose to consider this little scene as a mere April cloud bursting in a sudden shower, but leaving the heaven of their love bright as ever, afterwards.

He began chattering about Five Oaks and doings in the neighbourhood, gave an imaginary message from Floss, who was supposed still to bemoan Catherine's absence, described the glories of the Autumn landscape with truth and force; and then glided on into talk of new furniture which Catherine must choose, and pictured future happy days with faith in the coming reality.

And Catherine—though more than once her lips parted to reply—had no longer courage to say "No!"

By and by, Reuben's heart seemed warmed

by its own love and truth—and he hinted, a little mysteriously, at a trouble he had, which Catherine ought to learn, only not now, there was not time, and the telling would stir him too much. But Catherine proffered sympathy, and this was so sweet, that he told the story of the paragraph in the *Meadshire Chronicle*, with his mother's explanation of it, at once, little knowing that every sorrow of his just now would be another link of the chain which was binding his betrothed again to him.

And, just as the narrative was finished, Jenny opened the drawing-room door, timidly, inquiring if now she might take her music lesson. If "yes," she would begin playing, and Miss Otway, hearing the piano, would come up presently.

"Have I hindered it, Jenny?" exclaimed Reuben; "but you and Miss Otway will forgive me, I am sure. Let me help you," he continued, moving towards the piano to open it. But the young girl was before him; in a minute she had seated herself at the instrument, and was unrolling the piece of music she had left in the room two hours ago.

"What are we going to hear?" asked Reuben half playfully.

"I am learning a new fantasia on an old tune. I hope you will discover what it is."

So, saying, Jane began a brilliant prelude, which soon passed into the melody of "Should Auld Acquaintance be Forgot." Rich harmonies gave, to a cultivated ear, new pathos to the theme; and, as the girl was a born musician, the performance was really thrilling.

"Darling Kate," whispered Reuben, as he seated himself again for a moment by her side, "name the day you will be my wife! Nay, I will not leave London till the time is fixed. Speak to me, Kate, when shall it be?"

There was a pause; and then Catherine murmured: "*If* it is to be—I *will* fix the time. But, Reuben, let me go now. Let me go before Hester Otway comes in."

CHAPTER XX.

THE DAY IS FIXED.

To speedily buy, and the quality try
 Of gloves and perfumes, that a lady consumes,
 And satins and silks, and bonnets and caps,
 And velvet and laces, and other such traps,
 Which a bride must command,
 When she gives her fair hand.

T.

AND now the die was cast. Reuben had pleaded again and again, and had won over Catherine's parents to espouse his cause, so that the wedding-day was fixed for the first week in January. He had prolonged his stay in London day after day until Hubert Freeth returned from Fenfield, and then, with simple eloquence, had urged that the marriage should be no longer delayed.

It is true, there was a wordless floating idea among the elders, that Catherine would fain have waited a little longer; but the wish they thought was a fantasy—a caprice which it was best not to indulge. They were wrong, as we know, for Catherine sincerely meant what she said to Reuben, that if the marriage was to take place, she would at once fix the day. But there must have been something strange in her demeanour which was thus misinterpreted; for Reuben Appersley was far too loyal,—and, perhaps, too proud,—to breathe a word of what he considered a sacred confidence between them.

Reuben lingered a week or ten days in town, spending the greater part of every day by Catherine's side. Autumn though it was, and "out of the season," occupation was found for the country cousin, and a little unceremonious visiting took place. "Papa" was too busy to pay him much attention, but he was often ready with suggestions, and among others proposed that Mrs. Freeth should take him to Lady Hartington's on one of her reception afternoons.

Catherine excused herself from being of the party, and, consequently, the whole affair was flat and stupid to Reuben. And in truth he was out of his element in Lady Hartrington's drawing-room, and felt in a world to which he did not belong. He, whose judgment was slow, and whose opinions were all weighed and winnowed, whose loves were strong and hatreds deeply rooted, had not ready the talk of the coteries. The critic's incisive speech, the artist's studio language, the politician's latest slang, were to him nearly unintelligible babble, and almost bewildered him. Yet, observing that these people who claimed to be in the van of progress, and to belong to the elect of the "day after tomorrow," differed hugely among themselves, he took courage and escaped humiliation, content to be what he was, even though his opinions were those of "the day before yesterday."

Something of the feeling he had experienced he expressed at the dinner-table an hour or two afterwards, only the usual family party being present.

"You are half right and half wrong, Reuben,"

said Mr. Freeth, "in thinking thus slightly of the Sir Oracles. For my own part, I believe truth is more often flashed out in the warmth of contending opinions than evolved by the independent thinker. For this reason, some amount of intellectual society is a sheer necessity for brain-workers. I know I have often mastered a difficulty through the suggestions of an opponent's argument, and the obstacles foreseen by some one who called the difficult—impossible."

"It seems to me," replied Reuben, "that all the great truths of life were settled long ago."

"Yes," said Mr. Freeth; "though not the manner of looking at them. But every thoughtful mind has, I suspect, a not dissimilar experience. Men and women with hearts and brains are pretty sure, at some time of their lives, to be under the fascinations of novelty. They get entangled, so to speak, in a swarm of fire-flies. But another morning dawns, and the fire-flies drop, and the sun shines just as it did before. Depend upon it, as we grow older we survive many a wrong impression, and grow more reverent to the past. So that the

opinions of the 'day after to-morrow' will often be the same as those of the 'day before yesterday.'"

"Uncle," exclaimed Reuben, "I am delighted to find you growing such a good old Tory."

"No, no, not a Tory; but I confess to being rather more of a Conservative than formerly."

"Please, Hubert, dear, don't talk politics," said Mrs. Freeth.

"My love, I am not thinking of such a thing; my little speech was merely incidental. But how did you like your visit to Lady Hartrington?"

"Oh, she was as kind as ever, but so sorry Catherine was not with us. I think she was very much pleased that I introduced Reuben to her."

"Did she show you her autograph book?" asked Catherine, addressing Reuben.

"No," he replied. "Is it curious—should I have liked to see it?"

"Quite a treasure. She has Tennyson and the Brownings, and Wordsworth, and the Duke of Wellington, and Nelson's writing with his left hand,"

Catherine observed that Reuben warmed at the mention of Wellington and Nelson as he exclaimed, "Saviours of their country, I should have liked to see their writing," while he was comparatively indifferent about the poets. A slight thing this indifference, and yet it fell with a chill upon her heart.

That drawing-room of Lady Hartrington's, with its buzz of tongues and clash of thoughts, its bright faces and varied forms, seemed to her fancy like a lost paradise, where happy spirits congregated, among whom, henceforth, she would have no part. I wonder how many a heart has been wrecked by undisciplined hero-worship, and the eager desire to taste life, heedless of the bitter lees which lie beneath its brightest bubbles!

Reuben quitted London a happy man. The brief trouble which had brought him so suddenly to town had passed away, leaving only a memory on his mind more of tenderness towards Catherine than of personal pain. And his next visit was to be as bridegroom.

Meanwhile, the *trousseau* had to be provided, and those infinite details to be arranged

inseparable from a wedding *comme il faut*. Of course, Mrs. Brindley was called to the council, and, indeed, Aline was asked to be one of the bridemaids. But though Mrs. Brindley gave a good deal of shrewd, serviceable worldly advice, she and Catherine frequently differed in matters of taste. Mrs. Brindley liked novelty, and generally approved of the prevailing fashion. Catherine had an artist's eye for colour and contrast, for form and congruity, and, of course, after all, it was her judgment which decided. It would be false to say Catherine did not take some amount of interest in selecting the beautiful fabrics her father's generosity placed at her disposal. She did, for that artist's eye for beauty will delight itself whenever there is the opportunity, and the woman who is indifferent about her dress—save temporarily and under circumstances of crushing misery—has something inharmonious in her nature. Besides, Catherine was making a brave fight to be happy, and schooling herself to magnify every morsel of pleasantness in her path.

I dare say she would have been judged by strong-minded women as a little frivolous, and

misjudged, as so many people are, for showing decided tastes and a decided will about black and brown, and blue and green, and silk and satin, and Honiton lace and Brussels; but, on the other hand, these very misjudgers would, perhaps, have deemed her insipid or affected, had she appeared a shade too indifferent about her equipments. It was a good deal wiser of Catherine Freeth to turn her thoughts resolutely into the milliner's region of ribbons and laces, and to magnify its importance to herself, than to let her thoughts drift into Lady Hartington's drawing-room, and be caught in the currents that flowed thence!

In reality, Catherine was growing every day more reconciled to her lot, more calmly contented, more hopeful for the future, and if—! Well, if there were no charts ill drawn, no adverse winds, no skies obscured, no compass lost, no ill-built ship, no storms to be dreaded, no shoals and rocks for the mariner to shun, surely his vessel would bound gayly over the waves, and ever come safely to port; but I do not think the steersman could claim any badge of

distinction, or order of merit, as guerdon for his success.

The short Winter days seemed all too brief for the shopping which had to be done, and in which Catherine appeared to take so deep an interest—besides there were many visits to be paid; and, to add to the bustle and excitement of the time, there was to be a New Year's juvenile party at Telford House, to keep Teddy's birthday, with Christmas-tree and Twelfth-night characters, so that, at last, the younger children might have the delight of receiving and entertaining their own especial guests.

To a certain extent, Mrs. Freeth enjoyed the needful preparations. A children's party did not present itself to her mind under formidable aspects—it would afford her ample scope for thoughtful kindness, and the good management in which she delighted, and her shyness did not amount to fear of a child, be it prince or peasant. Possibly, if she had had a wider acquaintance with some of those terrible little people of modern times, who seem never to be, nor to have been children, her confidence in herself might have received a shock. As it was, she

had an innocent pleasure in noticing Phoebe and Jane's girlish eagerness, and harmless pride in their promotion—each feeling a new dignity as prospective youthful hostess. Perhaps Phoebe tossed back her curls a little oftener than was necessary, but the rippling smile on little Jenny's face was equally typical of her satisfaction. Of course, these feelings were a little dashed by that amusing contempt for "mere children," which the girl in her early "teens" is sure to experience; but this young party was a sort of preparation for real grown-up society, with all its anticipated privileges, and as such had its fascinations. As for Gilbert, content that it was going to be a "stunning" affair, he had no suggestions to offer. Teddy, in a manner the hero of the occasion, rested on the promise that he should sit up to supper; and even little Lucy, who now could toddle and chatter, was, at any rate, to see the Christmas-tree alight.

Certainly, nobody guessed that the Fordinghill constituency and the Fenfield disaster could have anything to do with the children's party.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.





